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Images-Allegories in the Medieval Sculpture of Armenia and the South Caucasus

The subject of sculptural heads in the medieval art of Armenia and the South Caucasus is not new. Many years ago, I published an essay devoted to the so-called masks, or faces in the medieval sculpture of Armenia and Georgia in the 5th volume of the collection of articles of APThA [8]. In that preliminary research, the main goal was to draw the attention of scholars to the unique sculptural faces, or heads which are significantly different from other sculptural images abounding in the art of Armenia and the South Caucasus (about forty monuments from the 5th to the 17th centuries). It was an attempt to collect and systematize such kind of images, making preliminary decisions about their meaning. Over time, the material was revised and new information was revealed so that the available data allow us to take a fresh look at the symbolic images under discussion in the decorative system of churches in medieval Armenia and the South Caucasus. At this stage of the study, speaking about the meaning and function of the sculptural heads, we can interpret them as allegories, or personifications of natural elements which are associated with the idea of a Celestial event — the End of Times or the Second Coming. In the process of clarifying the symbolic meaning of such kind of images, the sculptural heads of two churches, Syuni-Vank (7th century, Armenia) and Kumurdo (10th century, Georgia), were of decisive importance.

Sculptural Heads in the Decoration of Syuni-Vank and Kumurdo

Syuni-Vank (also known as Sisavan) was built between 670–680 AD in the region of Syunik, Armenia, and was originally dedicated to St. Gregory the Illuminator. It was the cathedral and palace church of the princes of Syunik [17, pp. 63–76; 11, pp. 129–131; 20, p. 281]. Among the figurative images of the church, three groups stand out: they are coeval to the building, but markedly different by iconography. The first group consists of the frontal busts of the four Evangelists on the outer cornice of the drum with inscriptions of their names [11, pp. 128–129]. The Evangelists are looking at the four corners of the world. Each of them is with a halo, holding a codex in one hand, and blessing with the other. Also, they have a tonsure, which is a very rare iconographic detail for the Caucasus region, being a reminiscence of the antique and early Christian iconographic tradition. It is known only from two or three monuments (for instance, the portraits of Matthew and Luke in the Armenian Gospel of Queen Mlke, 862) [7, pp. 109–128]. The second group, which is inside the church, represents the relief busts of the patrons, Prince Kohazat, Bishop Hovsep, and Monk, Theodoros, with some individual features and corresponding inscriptions of their names. These reliefs are raised high at the level of the squinches [17, pp. 65–70; 11, ill. 1434–1436].

However, it is the third group of the images of Syuni-Vank, located in the external architectural niches of the building that is of particular interest in the context of this research.



Fig. 1. Female head/allegory. Gndevank. External niche. Southern façade. 10th century. Armenia. Photo: Archive of RAA



Fig. 2. Female face with snakes. Archivolt of the niche. Eastern façade. Tatev. Church of Sts. Peter and Paul. 10th century. Armenia. Photo: Lilit Mikayelyan



Fig. 3. The Sun and the Moon allegories. Bet Shean. Synagogue. Floor mosaic. 6th century. Israel. Photo after Hachlili R. (2009) [6, pl. VIII, 4b]

Four voluminous heads without inscriptions occupy the bottom of the squinches of the external niches [17, p. 65; 18, p. 229; 11, p. 130]. Here one can see three female busts in different states of preservation and one male bust. The images of women are similar: all of them have a lush hairstyle (Ill. 39), the edges of their robes are decorated with a rich wicker trim. The male image has a mustache and a beard, wearing a cone-shaped headdress — a capuche — on his head. Against the background of the sculptural heads, one can see a round base, which, I think, is not a halo, but rather the outline of the base of each image.

The human heads of Syuni-Vank have not been identified and are very often ignored by scholars, since they do not have any inscriptions and their function in the system of the decoration of the church is not clear. From the eight architectural niches of Syuni-Vank, only four are decorated with heads: two in the western façade, and two in the southern one. Most likely, they are matched to the main two entrances to the church.

Another important monument is the Cathedral of Kumurdo, built in 964 and located in Javakheti, Georgia [23, p. 6; 1, pp. 94, 96; 2, p. 120]. This church traces back to another epoch, but its decorative program is similar to the sculptures of Syuni-Vank. Thus, the symbols of the four Evangelists are inserted into the decorative frame of the eastern window. Another group presents the full-length figures of the patrons, King of Abkhazia Leon III and his sister Gurandukht, according to the inscriptions. The figures are inside the church, on the squinches on the sides of the eastern apse.

And finally, let us discuss the sculptural heads inside the four outer niches of Kumurdo Cathedral. In contrast to Syuni-Vank, in Kumurdo, there are three male heads of the same type — each with a mustache and an elongated beard, but without a headdress (Ill. 40) — and one female head of a voluminous hairstyle. The sculptural heads are distributed in the following way: one head in each of the northern and southern niches, and two inside the paired niches in the eastern façade. What is most important, these sculptures have explanatory inscriptions, which is unique for Eastern Christian art. According to these inscriptions, the two male heads of the eastern facade represent the “Earth” and the “Sky” (Ill. 40); the third male head in the southern niche is named “Adam,” and finally, the female head in the northern niche is called “Eve” [23, p. 11; 1, ill. 76–79; 2, ill. 324–327]. The inscriptions make it clear that in Kumurdo we have allegorical images which are common for medieval art. I think that the explanatory inscriptions of these heads are the clue to understanding similar images on other monuments in Armenia and the South Caucasus, and this approach has not been applied yet.

If there is a question about the similarity of the sculpted heads in the architectural niches of the two churches under discussion, I will say that they are identical both in terms of compositional and iconographic peculiarities. Moreover, they coincide with a number of other sculptural heads in the decoration of some other churches in the region (they will be presented further). Both in Syuni-Vank and Kumurdo, the heads, or busts, are almost round sculptures; they are located in the architectural niches and represented in a frontal pose; they have a very conventional, detached look, and the images are highly generalized unlike donor portraits (Ill. 39, 40). Indeed, in medieval donor portraits, there is a certain amount of generalization, but at the same time, they are endowed with some portrait features.

As the sculptural heads of Syuni-Vank are not accompanied by any inscriptions, some scholars have tried to interpret them as patrons [26, pp. 47–49], which is not true, since the latter, as I have already noted, differ significantly from the donor portraits of the same church. Moreover, the analysis of medieval Eastern Christian donor portraits, including those in the South Caucasus, does not give a single example of the depiction of patrons in the form of heads (there are busts, but mostly they are full-length figures). Let me also note that there was an attempt to identify one of the female busts of Syuni-Vank with the head of a ram [11, p. 129], which was mainly due to the damaged state of the sculpture and the absence of a detailed iconographic analysis.



Fig. 4. Female head/allegory. Capital. Austrian Hospice courtyard. Jerusalem, Israel. 5th–6th centuries. Photo: Svetlana Tarkhanova

Faces or Sculptural Heads on Other Monuments of Armenia and the South Caucasus

The characteristic features that have been noted in connection with the sculptural heads of Syuni – Vank and Kumurdo are also inherent in other similar images of this region. They are not always presented in a form of round sculptures; there may be reliefs as well. But it is mandatory that the images should be represented as faces or heads (rarely busts); they should have a detached look and a highly generalized composition. Often these images have attributes revealing their symbolic meaning.

As noted, there are quite a lot of such images-allegories, or personifications, in the sculpture of Armenia and the South Caucasus [8, pp. 263–264]. They are part of the decoration of churches of different periods of the Middle Ages and occupy different parts of the church building. Sculptural heads in external niches are more wide spread, but they can also decorate altar capitals, church facades, especially the eastern one, flank portals or the archivolt of windows and niches.

The earliest examples of the images-allegories are the heads on the capitals of the altar pilasters of the one-aisle basilica in Bayburt and two relief busts on the sides of the central western window of the church in Tekor (destroyed). Both these Armenian churches date back to the 5th century. Among the faces on the capitals of the basilica in Bayburt, two images have specific attributes: one has a crescent on its head, while the other has a high triangular headdress [10, p. 98]. Such attributes are known from other sculptures as well and may indicate specific allegorical images, such as the personifications of the Sun and the Moon. Among the churches of the 7th century, including Syuni-Vank, the Church of Hnevank stands out. Here, on the antevolts of the drum, there are voluminous male faces one of which has a dissected beard (an important detail!) and wears a hat, while the other is without a headdress. Universalized faces can be found on the archivolt of the windows of the Big Church in Artik and Djgrashen (both in Armenia); also, voluminous heads flank the northern portal of Ateni Sioni Church (Georgia) [15, ill. 27]. A male face in a frame decorates the northern façade of the memorial monument in Aghitu, in Sisian (Armenia). During the 10th and 11th centuries, the number of such images doubled. This is the main church of Tatev Monastery, the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul, where we can see images of two types: voluminous heads inside the architectural niches and relief faces on the archivolt, the male and female images being distinctly different [19, ill. 6, 7]. Moreover, two female faces on the archivolt of the eastern niches are presented with snakes (Fig. 2). More recently, Lilit Mikaelyan has given a new interpretation of these female images with snakes as allegories of the celestial luminaries, making an analogy between some Armenian and Islamic iconographic samples [16, pp. 234–236]. Voluminous heads can be found in the architectural niches of Gndevank (Fig. 1), Vorotnavank (Armenia), Urta (Kars region, now Turkey), and Ishkhan Cathedral (now in Turkey), while relief faces decorate the interior of the churches of Kars [28, pp. 50–53, pl. VII], Gumbet Kilise (now in Turkey) and Varazgom (Syunik-Artsakh). Among Abkhazian and Georgian monuments of this period, the sculptures of the cathedrals in Kumurdo, Kutaisi (Bagrat Church) [2, ill. 320, 324–327, 415–418] and Vale should be mentioned. Thirty-three similar relief faces have been recorded on different cornices of the Church of the Holy Cross on Aghtamar Island [20, pp. 179–187; 3, p. 17] (now in Turkey), but probably, only part of them, namely the relief faces on the cornice of the drum, can be attributed to allegorical images. It is among these images-allegories of the Holy Cross Church that one can distinguish male faces with a triangular headdress and a crown as the characteristic attributes of the personifications [8, pp. 263–264]. As for the 13th

century, we can mention the faces inside the outer niches of Makaravank Monastery, on the eastern facade of the Church of St. Gregory in Tatev as well as those in Goshavank (sundial), Sanahin and Nor Varagavank Monasteries (Armenia). In Georgia, the drum of the church in Pitareti is decorated with voluminous faces [2, ill. 582]. This incomplete list of monuments testifies to the well-established iconographic and artistic tradition of using symbolic faces, or heads, in the decoration of medieval churches in the South Caucasus.

The Allegories in Early Christian Art and in the Art of Medieval Armenia and the South Caucasus

Indeed, the interpretation of faces and sculpted heads in the sculpture of Armenia and the South Caucasus as allegories is unexpected, but it should be noted that various personifications are widely used in Christian art. Since the Christian culture of the South Caucasus is part of the Eastern Christian world, it has undergone the strong influence of the latter, so the existence of some common motifs and images is very usual in the cultural development of the time.

The allegories inherited from Greco-Roman culture can be found in abundance in early Christian floor mosaics and Coptic textile. It is quite obvious that, having retained their symbolic meaning in general, the ancient allegorical images or personifications have been rethought in the context of Christian perceptions. Early Christian monuments have such symbolic images as the personifications of the Sun and the Moon, the allegories of the rivers of Paradise, Sea and Ocean, the Seasons, the Earth, as well as images of churches, synagogues, the holy cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, etc. There are even certain canons for their depiction: some of the personifications such as the Earth, the Moon, some months, and the Church are presented as female images¹, while the allegories of the rivers and the Sun are male images although this is not a strict canon.

Among the allegories in Christian art, the images of the luminaries — the Sun and the Moon — stand out. They are almost obligatory in the scenes of the Ascension and the Crucifixion, as they emphasize the universal significance of the New Testament events. The Sun and the Moon are mainly depicted as a young man and a woman respectively. The image of the Sun is a young man wearing a conical headdress or a crown and holding a torch in his hand, while the Moon in the image of a woman often has a crescent on her head [6, pp. 179–195]. In this regard, we can see the direct iconographic relations with similar images in the sculpture of Armenia and the South Caucasus. Thus, the face with a crescent on its head in the pre-altar capital in Bayburt can be compared with the images with a crescent from the floor mosaic in Bet Shean (6th century, Israel) [6, pl. VIII, 4b] (Fig. 3); the miniature of the Ascension from the Rabula Gospel (586, folio 14r, Lorenziana Library, Florence) [13, ill. 32], and the medallion in the Armenian-Chalcedonian frescoes of the church No. 7 in Saberebi Monastery (10th century, Georgia) [24, ill. 39]. There are also interesting male heads with elongated and dissected beards, sometimes with a conical headdress or a crown, which can be seen in the churches of Hnevank, Syuni-Vank, Aghtamar, Sts. Peter and Paul in Tatev and Kumurdo (Ill. 40). These heads exactly follow the early Christian allegories in the early Byzantine ivory cover (6th century, setting of the Etchmiadzin Gospel, Matenadaran) [14, ill. 12, 13]; the images in the floor mosaics of the churches of Deacon Thomas on Mount Nebo and Al-Qadir (6th century, Jordan) [22, pp. 129, 187–188, ill. 154, 155, 267], etc.

Considering the busts of Syuni-Vank, particularly the well-preserved female head in the

¹ There is an image of the personification of the Church in the relief of Armenian *stele* from Agarak.

north-western niche, one can compare it with the image of a Roman matrone (Ill. 39), as well as with the head of a personification/Goddess (?) in the early Christian capital from Jerusalem (Fig. 4). At the same time, it is also similar to the images of female allegories in a number of early Christian monuments, such as the image of Gaia/Earth (3rd to 4th centuries); the image of Ariadne (5th century) in Coptic textiles from the Louvre collection [12, ill. 141b], and an image in the pavement of the Church of John on Mount Nebo (565, Jordan) [22, p. 129, ill. 217]. Besides, it also corresponds with a female head with lush curly hair that was accidentally found not far from the monument in Aghitu in 1998, probably of the same period as the Syuni-Vank sculptures (now in the History Museum of Sisian) (Ill. 39). Both these sculptural heads from Armenia perfectly coincide with the images of the Christian allegories already mentioned above, which is justified both from an iconographic and historical point of view, since antique reminiscences were very strong in the art of Armenia until the 8th century. The presence of the antique artistic sense of the time is obvious in the Armenian architecture of the “Golden age” (7th century) [5]. Traces of the antique heritage have also been preserved in fragments of Armenian monumental painting and miniatures [4, pp. 89–98; 27, pp. 41–135; 9, pp. 79–84]. Actually, the images of the Evangelists with a tonsure in Syuni-Vank are clear evidence of the existence of this tradition. After all, it was at that time that many cult objects were brought to Armenia, including the precious Byzantine ivory, which later became the cover of the Armenian Etchmiadzin Gospel (989), with the personifications of the Sun, the Moon and the city of Jerusalem on it [14, ill. 12, 13].

This iconographic tradition left a tangible mark in the art of medieval Armenia. Later the allegories of the Sun and the Moon, as symbols of universal events, appeared on some Armenian *khachkars* (slabs with cross compositions). In the *khachkar* composition, decorative rosettes are very common: depicted on the sides of the Cross, they symbolize the heavenly bodies. In some cases, they are duplicated by animal figures, a falcon and a bull which are the symbols of the luminaries (*khachkar* “Amenaprkich” from Urts, 1279, Etchmiadzin) [21, ill. 266–267]. At the same time, in some *khachkars*, the images of the luminaries, the Sun and the Moon, are presented as human faces. One of the best examples of the depiction of the allegories-faces on the sides of the Cross is a *khachkar* from Mshkavank Monastery (13th century) [21, ill. 483] (Ill. 41).

Summing up, we can say that in the niches of Syuni-Vank and Kumurdo, as well as in the other churches where male and female faces, or voluminous heads are presented, they appear as allegories or embodiments of the Earth, the Sky, the Sun, and the Moon, highlighting the universal meaning and scale of the Biblical story, and act as the reminders of the Second Coming. Perhaps, the images of Adam and Eve in Kumurdo emphasize two fundamental concepts of Biblical history — the original sin and the way of Salvation. Therefore, it is quite understandable why such images-allegories occupy certain places in the decoration of churches: pre-altar capitals (Bayburt), church drums, as the scope of Heaven (Hnevank, Aghtamar, Pitoreti), western and southern facades of churches with the main entrances, and, of course, eastern facades — the symbolic places of the Second Coming.

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Title. Images-Allegories in the Medieval Sculpture of Armenia and the South Caucasus²

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Abstract. The article deals with the sculptural faces, or heads, which are very popular in the art of medieval Armenia and the South Caucasus. They often occupy the outer niches of the churches, decorate altar parts, or eastern facades. These generalized images, devoid of individual features, differ markedly from the donator and other images. The iconographic analysis and comparisons with similar images from early Christian art (floor mosaic, textile, sculpture) give every reason to consider them as images-allegories, or personifications symbolizing natural elements and other symbolic images. For a better understanding of the meaning of these sculptural heads, or faces, the article focuses on the decorative program of two churches — Syuni-Vank (7th-century Armenia) and Kumurdo (10th-century Georgia), which coincide in the composition and groups of images.

Keywords: Syuni-Vank, Sisavan, sculpture, head, bust, image, allegory, Kumurdo, Aghtamar, Tatev

Название статьи. Образы-аллегии в средневековой скульптуре Армении и южного Кавказа³

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются скульптурные лики, или головы, которые часто встречаются в искусстве средневековой Армении и южного Кавказа. Они часто занимают внешние ниши церквей, украшают приалтарную часть, или восточный фасад. Эти обобщенные, лишённые индивидуальных черт изображения заметно отличаются от донаторских и других изображений. Иконографический анализ и сопоставления с похожими изображениями в раннехристианском искусстве (напольная мозаика, ткани, скульптура) дают все основания рассматривать их как образов-аллегорий, или персонификаций символизирующих природные стихии и другие символические образы. Для лучшего понимания значения данных скульптурных голов, или ликов в статье основной акцент делается на декоративной программе двух церквей — Сюни-ванка (VII в., Армения) и Кумурдо (X в., Грузия), которые совпадают по структуре и образам, кроме того в Кумурдо имеются и пояснительные надписи, что является исключительным случаем.

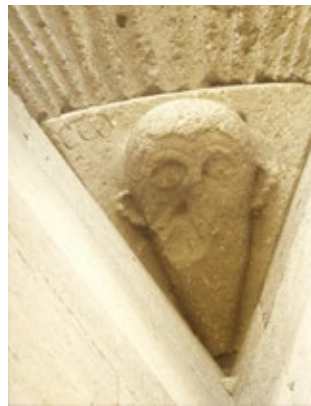
Ключевые слова: Сюни-ванк, Сисаван, скульптура, голова, бюст, лик, аллегория, персонификация, Кумурдо, Ахтамар

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Ill. 39. Female head/allegory. Syuni-Vank. External niche. Western façade. 7th century. Armenia.
Photo: Zaruhi Hakobyan



Ill. 40. Male head/allegory. Kumurdo.
External niche. Eastern façade. 964.
Djavaxeti, Georgia. Photo: J.-M. Thierry
(the archive RAA)

Ill. 41. Fases-allegories of the Sun and the Moon.
Khachkar. Mshkavank. 13th century. Armenia.
Photo after: Petrosyan H. L. Khachkar: the Origins,
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