ПАМЯТЬ КУЛЬТУРЫ

Cultural Memory

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ST. GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL IN YURIEV-POLSKY: THE MEETING OF THE CULTURES OF EAST AND WEST IN PRE-MONGOL RUSSIA

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The 13th century was a difficult period in the history of Old Russia. Its first decades were marked by intensively continuing internecine wars of big and small princely clans for the division and redistribution of territories, for the Kiev principality and primacy in the Russian lands. Wars continued with the closest neighbors – in the Baltic States with Lithuania, Chud', Swedes, and the Teutonic Order in the Volga region – with the Bulgars, in Galich and Volhynia – with Hungarians and Poles. Disputes between clans sometimes led to irreversible consequences, which served as a kind of threshold, a harbinger of the terrible, tragic times to come¹.

In 1203 the combined forces of Rurik Rostislavich, Olgovichi and Cumans took over and monstrosly plundered Kiev. According to the chronicle, churches were destroyed, including St. Sophia, the Desyatinnaya Church, and all monasteries. Apparently, it was mainly the Cumans who robbed, captured and killed and then drove away their captives in the steppes². Only foreign merchants managed to save their lives. So far all these situations did not allow to notice a new approaching threat, to prevent the terrible chaos, devastation and destruction of many Russian cities – the Mongol invasion. Internecine conflicts did not stop even after the first appearance of the Mongolian hordes in the South of Russia in 1223 and the crushing defeat of the Russian and Cumans armed forces in the battle with the Mongol on the Kalka River³. And they took place not only between separate princely clans, but also within them.

A few years earlier, a conflict between the sons of the deceased

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Vladimir Grand Duke Vsevolod III of Vladimir led to a bloody battle on the Lipets river near Yuriev-Polsky in 1216.

Paradoxically, the ongoing political and military developments absorbing the attention, forces and resources of conflicting clans, leading to the fragmentation of Rus, its disintegration into separate feudal principalities were at odds with the flourishing of cultural and artistic life in the Russian lands. Works of painting and architecture which were created, preserving the artistic traditions of the 11th – 12th centuries acquired new qualities. Their scale increased, the nature of their interaction with the environment changed.

Along with the disunity of the Russian lands, the foundations of national identity were formed, the cultural community of different territories of the country was developed, the common space of Russian medieval culture was formed.

The first third of the 13th century was a time of creation, intense creativity (is it not a kind of premonition?) in all types of artistic activity: stone construction, stone carving, monumental painting, and applied art. This was partly facilitated by the influx of artistic forces after the capture of Constantinople in 1204 by the crusaders⁴ as well as the activities of vagrant art ateliers. The former established trade, political and cultural contacts of the Russian principalities with Byzantium were interrupted for a long time, but cultural ties with Western Europe were strengthened and developed. L.A. Belyaev, reflecting on the relief carving of the facades of Vladimir-Suzdal churches, noted its fundamentally “international” character, which allows an almost arbitrary selection of analogs in the ocean of pictorial and ornamental motifs of the “Renaissance of the 12th century” (we add – and the first third of the 13th century).

Even the most successful of the numerous attempts to establish the dependence of the iconography of the reliefs of the Vladimir-Suzdal cathedrals on one source or another, in his opinion, do not lead to an unambiguous solution. In the “transitional period” this is already a common European legacy, and next to any Byzantine-Russian correlation one can easily add a third one – “Romanesque”⁵.

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Little has survived from the monuments of the first third of the 13th century. However, what has survived – including the “Golden Gates” of the Nativity Cathedral in Suzdal⁶, its facade carving, and a number of illuminated manuscripts – may well be considered masterpieces of medieval art. The external decoration of St. George’s Cathedral in Yuryev-Polsky (1230 – 1234), which is one of the most outstanding and, at the same time, the most mysterious specimens of the Vladimir-Suzdal monumental carving, can also be attributed to them⁷.

This entire period in the history of medieval art is distinguished by a peculiar combination of styles from different artistic worlds. In the case

of St. George's Cathedral, it acquired a somewhat paradoxical character, enhanced by the random selection and placement of carved slabs during the restoration of its upper part which collapsed in the 15th century.

Ornamental carvings enveloping the lower half of the temple, the keeled ends of the arches of the arcature-columnar frieze, a number of separate reliefs have an oriental character, and the capitals with embossed human masks and heads imbedded into the upper part of the temple have a distinctly Romanesque appearance, which generally corresponded to the widespread use of this type of capitals in Western architecture, especially in the 12th century.

It is obvious that alien craftsmen were involved along with the local ones in creation of the external decoration of St. George's Cathedral, although the specific typological and stylistic samples that guided the patron and the executors of a number of reliefs remain unclear.

The two types of small capitals in question have different prototypes. Those that have survived on the trapezoidal capitals of St. George's Cathedral with female faces and unusual male masks at the corners, presented in profile⁸, go back to motifs that have come down to us in Latin manuscripts of the 11th – early 12th centuries, for example, in the Gospels originating from the Tagernsee scriptorium (South Bavaria) – on the flat capitals of the columns in the Tables of canons, possibly oriented towards some monumental samples. The other type of capitals – with voluminous human heads⁹ – goes back to the models of Romanesque capitals of a “narrative” character, widespread in the architecture of the 12th century, preserved, for example, on the capitals of the church of the monastery of Santa Maria de Serrabona in France. However, it is known how much the art of the Romanesque world owes to the East. In this case, one can recall the upper corner stones of the Surb Khach church, Akhtamar, the 10th century.

It seems that the East has left its mark on the bestiary of St. George's Cathedral. It contains creatures that have not been found anywhere else in the Vladimir-Suzdal carvings. The most interesting and unusual of them are two winged dragons¹⁰. They have repeatedly attracted the attention of researchers, starting with N.P. Kondakov. He evaluated the carving of the cathedral ambiguously, pointing to the eastern types, drawings and forms observed in Syria and partly in the Caucasus. At the same time, the slabs with dragons, in his opinion, were made from templates of Western origin¹¹.

Actually, these fantastic monsters can be called dragons only conditionally. They do not have characteristic features inherent to medieval images of dragons – curved or coiled tails.

Their scattered images were once probably paired, although they do not have absolute similarities. They are executed in a different manner and, most likely, by different craftsmen. The left one is an example of a carving of outstanding quality, distinguished by special preciseness and elaboration of both the general shape (particularly, due to the straight

bevels of the edges which are but rare in St. George's Cathedral), as well as the details. In this case, we are dealing with a strongly protruding relief, the volume of which is partly leveled by the flat modeling of its front surface. It seems to be laid on the surface of the stone block, rather than, carved and projecting out from it.

In this image of a fantastic dragon-like creature we can observe the clearly marked zones, denoting its peculiar triple nature. The head and two clawed paws most of all refer to the *earthly* sphere. The elongated mouth of the monster reveals its dog-like bared teeth, making it possible to distinguish a protruding tongue and two large tusks. Under it, at the neck, a beard is clearly visible – a detail that goes back to the most ancient mythological concepts and archetypes, reborn transformed in many images into a kind of a hook. The upper half of the body of this creature is crossed by a powerful wing placed on it with three large feathers curling at the ends – a reflection of its second, *bird's* nature. The lower part of the body is transformed in a very unusual way. It is surrounded by two wide arched stripes, cut by lamellar scallops, a kind of fish scales. The image of this creature ends up with a fantastic tail, as a matter of fact, ornamental in nature, consisting of bifurcated, effectively diverging to the sides, sharply curved half-palmettes on an elongated rectangular base – perhaps a peculiar kind of stylization of a fish tail, designating the third, *aquatic* nature of this image.

The right dragon-like creature resembles the neighboring one only typologically. The contours of the relief are softened here and modeled along the edges, which makes the body of the monster look more voluminous. Elongated, completely covered with small fish scales, in the lower half it looks as if swollen and rounded. The wing and paws are smaller and weaker here. The scrupulously elaborate fur has turned into a narrow roller, bordering the mouth clogged with small teeth, the fur beard has been transformed into a more familiar hook. The base of the tail is shortened, the curves of the palmettes are simplified and almost merge with the body. The sophisticated stylization and ornamentation of the details of the left image is almost lost here. At the same time, the general feeling of the absolute uniqueness of the image remains.

The appearance of these creatures on the facade, their origin and purpose are mysterious. Only they, according to N.P. Kondakov can be called “scary creatures”, that is, “monsters”, which differ significantly from the symbolic and decorative fantasies in the carving of the cathedral¹². N.N. Voronin, on the contrary, compared them with the Serpent Gorynych of Russian fairy tales¹³. And G.K. Wagner found the closest analogies for them in the Byzantine carved bone, noting that the images in question could not be compared with any of the ancient Eastern and medieval images known to us¹⁴.

These creatures on the facade of St. George's Cathedral, indeed, do not resemble the grotesquely ugly, frighteningly naturalistic hybrids, the demons of late Romanesque and early Gothic plastics from German ca-

thedrals. Nor are they close to the images of dragons found in buildings of an earlier time which are comparatively of the same type, including those on the facades and in the interior of the monastery church of St. Servatius in Quedlinburg (1021), Germany, on the portal of the Cathedral in Speyer (1106), on the portal and the capitals of the church of the castle of Tyrolo in South Tyrol, although they all go back to the images of the ancient Eastern epos, to the most ancient cosmogonic ideas. Here one can also recall the fantastic creatures of antiquity – the Catos sea monsters, whose images have come down to us in the art of Southern Italy.

It seems that in relation to the images of dragon-like creatures under consideration on the facade of St. George's Cathedral, it is more appropriate to talk about the so-called "Sassanian" style, about the indirect influence of art, which united into one whole the culture of Sassanian Iran and the countries and peoples of the Caucasus, Armenia and Central Asia that were indissolubly linked with it in that era. Despite the apparent syncretism, the art of Sassanian Iran was such a distinctive and peculiar phenomenon that its influence went far beyond the geographic and chronological boundaries. Traces of its influence can be found on the vast territory from China to the Atlantic. Thus, according to Orbeli, many of the reliefs of the Surb Khach church "had they been removed from the walls of the Akhtamar temple, would undoubtedly have been recognized as monuments of Sassanian or "late Sassanian" art. And the construction of this monument dates back to the early thirties of the 10th century, and reliefs were carved in the process of the laying itself"¹⁵. In this case we are interested in the relief depicting a kind of monster, a polymorphic creature, the so-called vishap with features of a fish and a bird¹⁶.

The monsters on the facade of St. George's Cathedral are much more reminiscent of the images of the Iranian-Caucasian pantheon than the dragons of the Western European Middle Ages. They seem to be a kind of contamination of the image of the so-called Sassanid *senmurv*¹⁷, a fantastic polymorphic beast, a dog-bird of the Iranian mythology, a dynastic symbol of the Sassanids, and *vishap*, a fish-like creature, a specific image of the Caucasian mythology. The identification by K.V. Trever of the image of the dog-bird with the *senmurv* of the late Sassanian epic, as well as the understanding of its purpose, has been revised in recent decades¹⁸.

However, in recent studies, due to the established scientific tradition and the absence of any other appropriate name, the image of the dog-bird continues to be called *senmurv*.

Images of *senmurv* appeared in the late Sassanian art of the 6th – 7th centuries and were widely used on silver dishes, vessels and fabrics. Later on, far beyond the borders of the Sassanid possessions and much later than the end of their rule, buildings decorated with sculptures and works of metal, bone, clay, as well as fabrics were created, which in many respects – in typology, technique and style – were close to the Sassanian monuments proper.

The features of Sassanian art can be observed both in the monuments

of Western Europe and in the artistic culture of Byzantium. Thanks to the Crusades, along with other Eastern antiquities, various objects made of metal and Byzantine and Islamic silks which preserved the images of Sassanian art, began to arrive in Europe.

The dragon-like creatures from the facade of St. George's Cathedral, of course, cannot be directly compared with the works of Sassanian toreutics, such as, for example, a dish from the Hermitage, the 7th century¹⁹ or a dish from the British Museum, the 6th – 8th centuries. This is hardly possible if only because of the difference in the material and, accordingly, in the technique of execution and the given form of objects. Nevertheless, on both dishes in the middle part of the bodies of the Senmurvs, which are covered with fish scales, a certain disc-like shape is indicated (especially noticeable on the dish from the Hermitage). It is framed by an arcuate roller with a fine parallel notch. A slightly different version of the same motif is placed at the base of the lush tail of the beast. Wasn't it a similar decorative element that was enlarged and reworked, turning into such unusual arcuate stripes on the image of the left beast of St. George's Cathedral? And wasn't this shape transformed into a strange roundness on the body of the right beast?

A more direct analogy is the beard under Senmurv's open mouth on the plate from the Hermitage collection. And it also has a recognizable semi-palmette motif which is included in the lower part of the composition, as well as elements of floral ornamentation that adorn the tail of a fantastic beast on the plate from the British Museum.

It is hardly possible to assume the direct impact of the works of Sassanian toreutics on the creators of the images of St. George's Cathedral that interest us, although acquaintance with them cannot be completely excluded. These works were spread in the Cisurals where compact objects made of precious metals got through trade relations, exchange processes, in particular, for furs of forest regions. Many works of Sassanian art were found in Ukraine, in the vicinity of Starobelsk and Poltava²⁰. Sassanian products could also be known thanks to the Asia Minor centers, including Anatolia – the crossroads of influences of a very different nature.

With regard to the images of the dragon-shaped creatures of St. George Cathedral, one can talk about the powerful energy of transformation, about certain stages of the transformation of the original models, including their extension due to the requirements of location. This is not an imitation, but an interpretation, a play of fantasy, artistry, the highest skill of carvers. At the same time, sophisticated stylization and ornamentation of forms neutralize the belligerence of dragons, which has a rather mythological, symbolic character, which is typical for "Sassanian" art, in particular.

The comparison of the images of dragons that are of interest to us, preserving not so much the image as the spirit of Sassanian art, with the rest of the zoomorphic images on the facades of St. George's Church, most of which are successively associated with the previous monuments

of Vladimir-Suzdal carving, testifies not only to their originality, but also to their unconditional uniqueness²¹. They do not form a unity with the rest of the images of the carved ornamental decor of St. George's Cathedral, although its bestiary was not limited to these unusual creatures. It included, as we recall, the images of such polymorphic creatures as alkonosts and gamayunas, equally unusual for the monumental sculpture of ancient Russian temples, which were widespread in the mythology of the entire Western Asia, and passed from there into the Slavonic folklore and objects of applied art.

"The menagerie of Iran and the Caucasus – according to K.V. Trever – like the whole of that East, a piece of which is Iran and the Caucasus – is a whole world of ... fantastic creatures"²². How accidental does the appearance of some of its images on the facades of St. George's Cathedral seem ?

The ornament of St. George's Cathedral was called "arabesque"²³ by A.I. Nekrasov , and the same feature was noted by D.V. Ainalov²⁴. The braiding of the lower half of the cathedral with a solid ornamental pattern correlates with the so-called "fear of emptiness", typical for the artistic monuments of the East. A.N. Grabar, in relation to the Vladimir-Suzdal carving, wrote that this kind of "style is usually called "oriental". And this is true, if by "oriental" models they mean... formulas of the most ancient style, once created in Mesopotamia and taken over by Achaemenid Persia, then by Sassanian Iran and finally chosen by Muslim and Byzantine decorators, especially for precious silks of the 10th – 11th centuries"²⁵. However, fabrics decorated with images of Senmurvs and metal works could by no means be the only source for creating images of interest for us.

The typology and style of the individual carving elements and their origins still raise more questions than offer answers.

The pictorial concept of the carving of St. George's Cathedral corresponded with the general culture of the late 12th – early 13th centuries, the general trends in the development of late Romanesque outdoor decor, with facade surfaces which were often occupied with continuous grids with plot content or even not too ordered sets of ornamental and plot elements of various nature. The transfer of interior decoration or its main components to the facades, an appeal to the urban environment surrounding church buildings, an active demonstration of the foundations of the Christian faith, which is relevant for Western buildings, essentially devoid of interior decoration, unusual for Byzantine artistic culture – all these were to a certain extent adopted in Russia.

The region from which the masters who participated in its creation were invited along with local carvers, hardly lends itself to precise definition.

As it is known, in that era international art artists wandered and worked in the vast area of the Christian world. However, judging by the surviving monuments, Italian buildings were perhaps better known to

them than others. Anyway, the result of the work, done, apparently, by a mixed artel with the participation of local craftsmen was the creation of a temple, which can rightfully be called a masterpiece of ancient Russian architecture.

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The artistic life of Vladimir-Suzdal Russia emerged on a kind of cross-roads, a crossing of various stylistic influences, different artistic worlds. This may explain the implementation of various themes and motives in accordance with local tastes, a combination of different typologies and styles that form the phenomenon of the fantastical facade carving of St. George's Cathedral – a monument which is a unique work of the complex and contradictory Russian artistic culture of the 13th century.

Notes

Примечания

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⁸ *Вагнер Г.К.* Скульптура Владимиро-Суздальской Руси: г. Юрьев-Польский. Москва, 1964. Табл. VIIa–VIIg.

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The first decades of the 13th century, on the eve of the Mongol invasion, were a difficult period in the history of Old Russia. Princely feuds and fighting for the Kievan principality led to the fragmentation and weakening of the Russian lands. Oddly enough, this period also witnessed a rise in cultural and spiritual life. That was a time of creation and intensive creative activity, the continuation of the artistic traditions of the 12th century and the emergence of qualitative changes in art. St. George's Cathedral in Yuriev-Polsky erected in 1230–1234 is

one of the most outstanding and, at the same time, the most mysterious works of architecture of the 13th century. This entire period in the history of medieval art is distinguished by a peculiar combination of types and styles from different artistic worlds. In the case of St. George's Cathedral, it acquired a somewhat paradoxical character, enhanced by the random selection and placement of carved slabs during the restoration of its upper part which collapsed in the 15th century. The specific typological and stylistic samples that guided the customer and the executors still remain unclear. The author attempts to identify the origin of a number of motives of the Cathedral's carved decoration, with their analogues being found both in Western and Eastern art. The artistic life of Vladimir-Suzdal Russia emerged at a crossroads of various stylistic influences. The author argues that this may explain the implementation of various themes and motives in accordance with local tastes, which form the phenomenon of the facade carving of St. George's Cathedral – a unique monument of genuinely Russian artistic culture.

Ancient Rus, Russian Orthodox Church, political fragmentation, principality, artistic culture, artistic life, temple architecture, cathedral.

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Первые десятилетия XIII в., накануне монгольского нашествия, были сложным периодом в истории Руси. Княжеские междоусобицы, борьба за киевский престол раздробляли и ослабляли русские земли. Вместе с тем, как ни удивительно, культурная и духовная жизнь в эти десятилетия активно развивалась, это было время созидания, интенсивного творчества, продолжения традиций XII в. и появления новых, качественных, изменений в искусстве. Георгиевский собор в Юрьеве Польском, возведенный в 1230–1234 гг., представляет собой одно из самых выдающихся и, вместе с тем, наиболее загадочных архитектурных произведений XIII в. Весь этот период в истории средневекового искусства отличает своеобразное сочетание типологий и стилей разных художественных ареалов. В случае с Георгиевским собором оно приобрело в известной степени парадоксальный характер, усиленный случайным подбором и размещением резных камней при восстановлении его верхней части, разрушившейся в XV в. Типологические и стилистические образцы, которыми руководствовались заказчик и создатели храма, до сих пор остаются неясными. В статье предпринята попытка определить происхождение некоторых мотивов резной декорации собора. Аналогии им находятся в искусстве и Востока, и Запада. Художественная жизнь Владимиро-Суздальской Руси возникла на своего рода перепутье, перекрестии различных стилистических влияний. По мнению автора, этим может объясняться претворение в соответствии с местными вкусами многообразных тем и мотивов, которые образуют феномен фасадной резьбы Георгиевского собора – памятника, являющегося уникальным произведением именно русской художественной культуры.

Древняя Русь, Русская православная церковь, политическая раздробленность, княжество, художественная культура, художественная жизнь, храмовая архитектура, собор.