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The Essence of Heredity and Ancient Heritage in Christian Culture

Inheritability means the transmission of spiritual and material values to future generations. This process stems from the Lord's creative act – the genesis of the world and man. Let us refer to the Book of Genesis: 'And God said: let us make man in our image, after our likeness' (Gen., 1 26).

John of Damascus provides the following interpretation of this line:

And it was also fit that there should be a mixture of both kinds of being, as a token of still greater wisdom and of the opulence of the Divine expenditure as regards natures, as Gregorius, the expounder of God's being and ways, puts it, and to be a sort of connecting link between the visible and invisible natures. And by the word fit I mean, simply that it was an evidence of the Creator's will, for that will is the law and ordinance most meet, and no one will say to his Maker, Why have You so fashioned me? For the potter is able at his will to make vessels of various patterns out of his clay (*Romans 9:21*), as a proof of his own wisdom.

Now this being the case, He creates with His own hands man of a visible nature and an invisible, after His own image and likeness: on the one hand man's body He formed of earth, and on the other his reasoning and thinking soul He bestowed upon him by His own inbreathing, and this is what we mean by after His image. For the phrase after His image clearly refers to the side of his nature which consists of mind and free will, whereas after His likeness means likeness in virtue so far as that is possible.¹

These words clearly show, and the same is attested by Gregory of Nyssa in his *On the Making of Man*, that God created human mind in His liking. What does this mean? This means that by granting man the

¹ Saint John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Christian Faith*, Book II, Chapter 12.

creational faculties, various gifts, freedom and the ability to be the master of himself which presupposes mind's supremacy over body and not vice versa, God prepared man for divine abidance. Man must perfect in himself the likeness of God by acquiring virtues. He thereby accomplishes the divine design envisaging him as a compound of visible and the invisible, a corporeal intelligent being with an immortal soul, created by God as the master of the earth.

Thus, by being granted reason in the divine likeness, man acquired faculties for artistic creation, that is, various talents endowed to him by the grace of the Holy Spirit along with immortality. Apostle Paul writes in this regard: "And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another diversity of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, diving to every man severally as he will" (1 Cor. 12, 6-11). This grace of the Holy Spirit and the artistic potential originating from the same source, the Holy Spirit, unites people, but each creation of God, and respectively, each person is individual and human creations are likewise diverse. An artist endows its creation with unparalleled traits, unless he/she purposefully imitates someone else's work. This originality is the manifestation of the divine grace.

However, masterpieces may contain mutually unrelated, unaccountable similarities, as humans create on the earth in the likeness of nature created by God, and may perceive and represent some natural shapes in a similar way. A vivid example of this is artistic images of cross. I would specifically dwell on the so-called Bolnisi Cross, which abounds in analogues across different cultures. These analogues often are unrelated to Christianity and merely serve as decorative elements. Neither this is surprising, as the Cross, being the instrument of the crucifixion of Jesus, became a shrine in Christianity, while earlier it had been a torture device practiced by the Romans, or merely an ornament – a crossing of two lines or beams. Therefore, various versions of cross exist in arts of various countries. However, as the Bolnisi Cross is still somewhat different, this

formal similarity and difference in content, which is definitely non-hereditary, is clearly reflected in this example and will be discussed below.

The flared arms of the cross are interpreted as the symbol of cross patronage. The early period from which the Bolnisi Sion basilica dates (the 6th c.), its pre-Christian ornaments and early Christian architectural details (absence of the western door – the door was cut in a later period – which, according to academician Vakhtang Beridze, is uncommon for basilica) make the church unique not only within the context of Georgian architecture, but more broadly within Christian culture. According to Beridze, the walls of the basilica bear several different versions of cross as a Christian shrine, the so-called Bolnisi Cross – a cross with flared arms set in a circle – being one of them.² This type of cross is quite commonly used in Georgian architecture. It can also be found in Byzantine culture, though to a lesser extent. Similarly shaped ornaments existed in pre-Christian Syria as well. Such formal similarity frequently causes confusion. Some time ago, a Georgian lawyer, Davit Ebralidze shared on the Internet his opinion regarding the origin of crosses on a Sudanese slit drum from the British Museum. He read about the exhibit in a book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* by the Museum Director, Neil McGregor, but doubted the identity and function of this item, as well as the Islamic origin of the cross-shaped ornaments because of their striking resemblance with the Bolnisi Cross. Ebralidze applied for consultations to archeologist Guram Kipiani. The latter confirmed McGregor's information regarding the provenance and function of the exhibit. Moreover, Professor Kipiani commented that a big number of cross-shaped ornaments dating from the pre-Christian period were discovered on the territory of Syria. They must have later been adopted by Islam. According to Kipiani, similarly shaped pre-Christian ornaments can also be found on the territory of Georgia, while the so-called Bolnisi Cross is a replica of Emperor Constantine's Chi Rho and represents a circle with four overlapping arcs drawn inside it that make up the body of the cross.³

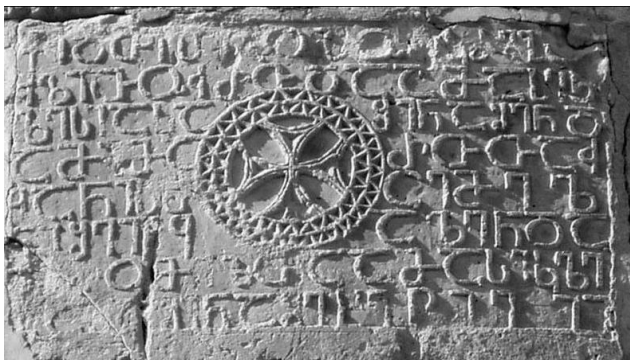
² Beridze V., *Bolnisi Sion* (according to *History of Georgian Art*, vol. 1, Tiflis 1936 and *Болнисский Сион*, *Enimskis Moambe*, 9, 1940), *Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, Tbilisi 1977.

³ Jghenti N., *The Bolnisi Cross and Islamic Ornaments*, http://for.ge/view.php?for_id=13143&cat=3 (June 5, 2012) (in Georgian).

We may come across similar cases in the history of art, culture and science, but they cannot be treated as the manifestation of heredity. Cross-shaped ornaments are widespread across different cultures. Christian art too frequently employs its stylized versions. This particular type of cross can be found in pre-Christian Georgia, while in the Christian period it even acquired a specific typological name 'Bolnisi Cross' and is more frequently represented in the scenes of the Elevation of the Cross by Angels.



Elevation of the Cross by Angels
Jvari (Cross) Monastery in Mtskheta, the 6th century



The Earliest Inscription from the Bolnisi Sion Basilica (the 5th c.) and the Bolnisi Cross in the Centre



The Islamic Slit Drum (late 19th c.)

From the British Museum with Ornaments Resembling the Bolnisi Cross

As concerns heredity in modern academic terms, it means the reception by one culture of traditions and practices existing in a different culture, thereby contributing to the continuity of those traditions and practices. The history of humankind abounds in such very interesting examples. Below I will dwell on the reflection and function of ancient artistic traditions in Christian culture in general.

I specify 'in general' as the Christian art originated on the territory of the Roman Empire, which then encompassed both Greece and Rome, and was produced by people who were immediate successors to the rich ancient cultural tradition and historical monuments. Along with the Jews, Christian art was created by the Greeks and Romans, who could see wonderful ancient frescos, the Parthenon and Phidias' sculptures. They had been educated at schools that carried on the great ancient cultural traditions. The Jews did not have rich painting traditions, unlike the Greeks and Romans, whose outstanding painting legacy is attested by frescos from Knossos, Thera and Etruscan sites. Therefore, Christianity acquired this rich tradition almost in all forms of art that were deemed appropriate in terms of Christian *weltanschauung*. It accepted ancient painting traditions but rejected the free style of frescos and borrowed the Syrian-Palestinian style, which better suited the ascetic character of Christian icon and fresco. Later original Christian iconographic schools were established in different countries, whose masterpieces are important

not only for the church but also for the history of art, for instance, the Cappadocian painting or old Georgian frescos and holy icons preserved in churches, internationally well-known museums (e.g. the Shalva Amiranashvili State Museum of Art) and galleries (e.g. the Tretyakov Gallery). Monasteries in Crete frequently hold exhibitions of Cretan art. All these relate to the Eastern Church. As concerns the Western Church, it is closer to the ancient tradition, especially the Age of the Renaissance, which is the revival of ancient art re-filled with the Christian content.

Basilica as a type of architecture is very important in Christian art as it is one of the basic types of Christian church. Raised images are frequently used on the walls of churches as well as on steles, stone crosses and gravestones. This tradition, practiced in antiquity, was carried on in Christianity. Georgian pre-Christian culture too is rich in this tradition. A great number of remarkable pre-Christian bas-reliefs were discovered on the territory of Georgia.

The Eastern Church did not accept a three dimensional representation of saint, such as sculpture, though individual sculptural images survive from the early Christian period. Conversely, this branch of art has been widely practiced in the Roman Catholic Church, which, apart from Renaissance masterpieces, abounds in sculptures of Christ, the Mother of God and saints created by modern artists as well.

Thus, antiquity has certainly left significant heritage to Christian culture. This is evident almost in every sphere of art. Christianity adopted what it needed – the high level of professionalism, and very often, the form (as in case of basilica) as well as the painting, stone carving and stone painting traditions – and filled these with Christian spirit and creed, as the veneration of the latter was the main function of the Christian art.

Abstract

Inheritability means the transmission of spiritual and material values to future generations. This process stems from the Lord's creative act – the genesis of the world and man. According to the Book of Genesis, the Lord created man in His image and after His likeness. As Holy Fathers Gregory of Nyssa and John of Damascus comment, God created human mind in His image. It can be therefore construed that the Lord endowed man with creational/artistic faculties and various talents. This grace, including the artistic potential, originates from the Holy Spirit and unites people. However, each creation of God, and respectively, each person is individual and human creations are likewise diverse. An artist endows its creation

with unparalleled traits, unless he/she purposefully imitates someone else's work. This originality is the manifestation of the divine grace.

However, masterpieces may contain mutually unrelated similarities, as humans create in the likeness of nature created by God, and may perceive and represent some natural shapes in a similar way. Therefore, formal parallels and similar shapes cannot always be attributed to cross-cultural influences and their respective histories need to be studied in depth. A vivid example of such parallels is close resemblance between cross-shaped ornaments on a Sudanese Slit Drum from the British Museum and the so-called Bolnisi Cross. Though almost identical, they have different origins and cannot be put down to cultural heredity. The article also cites other examples of formal coincidences across cultures.

As an opposite case to the above-mentioned accidental parallelism, the paper discusses the influence of ancient culture on Christian art, which frequently may not involve formal identity but is obviously hereditary: this is ancient cultural heritage – Greek and Roman painting, sculptural and architectural traditions adopted by Christian art and filled with the Christian creed.