

## Precious metal revetments on Georgian medieval painted icons: some observations on a devotional practice \*

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### Abstract

The embellishment of sacred images with precious metal was a widespread religious practice throughout the Byzantine world over many centuries. The cladding of Christian images in precious metal has long been an act of piety on the part of the faithful, representing their gratitude to their heavenly protectors for performed assistance. Georgian medieval icons encased in revetments of precious metal that carry their donors' supplicatory inscriptions, throw additional light on the ways in which such icons were used and venerated.

**“წმინდა სახეთა თაყვანისცემის პრაქტიკიდან: შუა საუკუნეების ქართულ ფერწერულ ხატთა ძვირფასი ლითონის შესამოსელნი**  
**ნინო ჭიჭინაძე**

ქრისტიანულ წმინდა სახეთა ძვირფასი ლითონით მოჭედვა-შემკობას მრავალსაუკუნოანი ისტორია აქვს. ფერწერულ სახეთა ჭედურ შესამოსელს მრავალგვარი პრაქტიკული, მხატვრულ-ესთეტიკური და სიმბოლურ-თეოლოგიური დატვირთვა ენიჭება. ჭედურობა ხატის ღვთისმეტყველების სიმბოლური გააზრების განუყოფელი ნაწილია, რომელიც ფერწერასთან ერთად ერთ, მთლიან ანსამბლს ქმნის. წმინდა სახეთა ჭედური და ფერწერული ნაწილების ურთიერთმიმართებასთან დაკავშირებით გასათვალისწინებელია იდეური, საკრალური და მხატვრული ასპექტების ერთიანობა. წმინდა სახეთა ძვირფასი ლითონით შემკობის ძირები საღვთო წერილსა და ხალხურ ღვთისმოსაობაში მოიძიება. ძვირფას ლითონთა შუქმფენობის, ბრწყინვალებისა და ელვარების გამო მათ სხვადასხვა ხალხთა კულტურაში საკრალური მნიშვნელობა ენიჭებოდა. ქრისტიანულ გნოსეოლოგიაში ოქროს გამორჩეული მნიშვნელობა აქვს და სინათლის, ღვთაებრივი ნათლის სიმბოლოდ წარმოგვიდგება. მეტაფორული გააზრებით ოქრო ნათლის “ხატია”, ხოლო ნათელი უფლის “ხატია”.

ქრისტიანულ პრაქტიკაში ფერწერული სახეების ჭედურობით შემოსვა ღვთისმოსაობის ერთ-ერთ გამოვლინებას წარმოადგენს. ჭედურშესამოსლიანი ფერწერული ხატები, როგორც ამას მათი წარწერები მოწმობს, უმეტესწილად შესაწირავ ხატებს წარმოადგენს, რომლებიც ღვთაებრივი მფარველობისა და მეოხებისათვის, ან სულის მოსახსენებლადაა შექმნილი. მოჭედილ წმინდა სახეთა სხვადასხვაგვარი ინტერპრეტაციაა შესაძლებელი, მაგრამ უწინარეს ყოვლისა წინა პლანზე იწვევს მათი კავშირი სანაწილეებთან, რომლებიც ძვირფასი ლითონისგან იქმნებოდა.

სტატიაში განხილულია შუა საუკუნეების ქართული ჭედურშესამოსლიანი ფერწერული ხატები და მათი მნიშვნელობა ზოგადად მართლმადიდებლური სახის თაყვანისცემის სურათის აღდგენაში.

The adornment of sacred objects with precious metal, one of the forms of expression of Christian piety, was a widespread religious practice throughout the Byzantine world over many centuries. It is generally accepted that the cladding of Christian images in precious metal was a pious donation on the part of the faithful, representing thank-offerings to a heavenly protector, donations for past benefits or future protection, security, and salvation. During the past ten years or so, numerous publications have been devoted to the symbolic meaning of sacred images and to their religious use. Very little is still, however, known about the origins of the metal revetments of painted icons and their semiotic aspects (Durand, 2004, pp. 243-251; Sterligova, 1991, pp.331-346, 1996, pp. 133-142; Chubinashvili, 1959, pp. 572-605; Grabar, 1975; Ševčenko, 1992, pp. 56-69; 1985, pp. 74-79).

The roots of adorning of sacred images with precious metal (mostly silver, or gilt silver) can be traced in Holy Scripture and in popular beliefs. The medium of icon revetments, silver or silver-gilt due to their physical properties, and their glittering and radiant effect have a particular function in different cultures. In the custom of embellishment of Christian images with precious metal could be seen the assimilation of pre-Christian traditions such as covering of statues of gods with gold and dedicatory offering of robes to them in Antiquity and the Biblical-Jewish tradition of sheathing of sacred objects in precious metal. Similarities can be noted in the terminology used in Antiquity and Byzantine times for such offerings. <sup>1</sup>

Holy Scripture and the works of numerous Christian writers reveal a wide range of symbolic and theological interpretations of silver and gold, and their role in piety and religious practice. <sup>2</sup>

The extensive use of gold in church art is based on Christian theology, which is entirely illuminated with the symbolism of light. Light, divinity and grace are semantically interwoven in Christian spirituality. According to Christian Gnosticism, gold is a symbol of divine light and metaphorically gold is an icon of light, while light is an icon of God. <sup>3</sup>

Icons with repoussé silver sheathing are known throughout the centuries: they are recorded in numerous eleventh and twelfth century Byzantine church documents – typika and in the inventories of the monasteries. <sup>4</sup> The earliest Byzantine icons that still retain their silver revetment are dated to the twelfth century. Later, it seems to have been quite a widespread practice in the Byzantine world mostly

from the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to overestimate works of medieval Georgian masters as they demonstrate a great variety of types and iconographic formulae of precious metal adornment. Almost all surviving Georgian medieval icons have metal adornment of one kind or another, with the exception of works of the provincial school of painting generally termed the Svaneti school.<sup>6</sup>

The study of the metal decoration of early Georgian icons is quite a challenging task, because none are preserved in their original state. More precisely, we have at present only the metal sheathing of once venerable images, while their painted parts are missing. The metal parts of icons are often fixed on to new boards with modern (eighteenth and nineteenth century) paintings, replacing or “reconstructing” the lost, or damaged, originals. Donors’ inscriptions on revetted icons contain no information about the painted images and so it is extremely difficult to discuss with any degree of certainty the correlation of painted icons and their precious metal decoration.

Traditionally, Georgian painted icons are adorned with silver (mostly silver-gilt) repoussé revetments, which cover the entire surface of the icons, leaving only faces exposed. The following type of repoussé casing appearing on Georgian icons consists of silver frames and background, or “field” of painted representations (see below for a discussion of the repoussé covering of the area around the figures; the latter term will be used since it is more appropriate for this part of icon revetment rather than the generally accepted “background”). To the last group are attributed icons with more modest decoration consisting just of metal frames. On numerous icons, where original metal parts are missing, traces of repoussé coverings such as silver nails, and/or fragments of mastic (resin) can still be seen. The preserved material indicates that the precious adornment and the painting of icons often belong to the same period while there are cases when icons received their adornment later on.

The sixth or seventh century encaustic icon of the Holy Face of Edessa from Ancha, or Anchiskhati, one of the most venerated holy images of medieval Georgia, is a striking example of this practice (Fig.1). According to tradition, this image appeared in Georgia at the time of the apostles and is connected with the Apostle Andrew (Ioanne of Ancha; Kubaneishvili, 1946, pp.381-383). The repoussé adornment of the icon is a product of five different historical periods: the repoussé frame was executed at the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth centuries, the inscription states that Ioanne,

bishop of Ancha adorned the icon, on instructions from Queen Tamar (before 1204), in the fourteenth century (about 1308-1334) the wings and the rounded top have been added, while the reverse of the wings were revetted in the 17th century. In the 18th century the setting of icon was renewed and precious stones were added, and the repoussé figure of Christ is a work of the 19th century. The icon of the Virgin Petritzonissa from Backovo monastery is supposed to have been executed in the early eleventh century, the present revetment is a work of the fourteenth century (1311), and icon was clad in a new revetment in 1819. According to A. Grabar the traces of nails on the Virgin's hands indicate that originally all the image except for the faces was covered with repoussé adornment (Grabar, 1975, p. 34, fig. 18; T. Sakvarelidze, 1987, pp. 8-24; figs. 1-5, pp. 26-28, fig.7).

In most cases the precious metal revetments of medieval Georgian painted icons are the traditional places for the display of patrons' dedicatory inscriptions. These inscriptions are a precious source for our investigation since they throw new light on the icons' repoussé cladding. The present article will be concerned with an analysis of some of the most significant examples of metal adornment with inscriptions and will offer some suggestions for the interpretation of precious metal coverings of painted images. It is impossible in a short article to address all the issues involved in the creation of precious casings, and so the discussion will be limited to images of high artistic quality, mostly belonging to "official art", with typical features of this type of icon.

The Transfiguration icon from Zarzma, is the oldest preserved example of an icon with a repoussé revetment (Fig. 2) (Georgian State Museum, Sh. Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts, original size 160x110cm.) (Chubinashvili, 1959, pp. 27-42, fig. 1-4; Sinai, ed. Y. Piatnitsky, O. Baddeley, 2000, B 97, pp. 119-120). Transfiguration icon was originally a painted image created in the early medieval period, presumably in the seventh or eighth century, received a repoussé metal cladding only later. This is one of the exceptional cases when the inscription contains exact date of the creation of the precious metal adornment. The embossed inscription in early Georgian asomtavruli uncial script on the lower part of icon states: "Christ, in the name of God this icon has been clad in help of Ghiorgi, lord Parsman Eristavi, Ivane, Tki... Mirian, Sula under the superior of the monastery Pavle ... choronicon was rv [106+780 = 886]" (Chubinashvili, 1959, p. 28). The painting of the icon is not preserved, but the repoussé revetment faithfully follows the painted composition

and gives us a clear idea of the original scheme of this venerable image. The silver adornment covers the entire surface of the icon leaving only the faces of the figures uncovered. The character of the silver gilt embossed revetment with the expressive, linear treatment of the flat monumental figures is in accord to the stylistic development of the Georgian plastic arts of this epoch. Later, in the second decade of the eleventh century, Zviad Eristavi restored the damaged part of the icon and fixed it on to a new board. He added a silver-gilt repoussé frame with 10 scenes from Dodecaorton. His supplicatory inscription reads: “In the name of God I, Zviad Eristavi, son of the blessed Eristavi Araba, was honoured to embellish this true icon; have mercy on my soul and my flesh, icon of the Transfiguration intercede for my soul on that day [Judgement Day]“ (Chubinashvili, 1959, p.32).

This image with miracle-working powers had a special importance in the spiritual life of medieval Georgia. The life of the monastery founder, The Life of Serapion of Zarzma, contains valuable information concerning its history. Throughout the Life, written by Basil of Zarzma, there is a stress laid upon the importance of the “life-giving icon of Transfiguration” and praise for its miracle-working powers. What is specially stressed in the text is the importance of the mission of Serapion, who is compared with Moses, chosen by God for a special mission. Like Moses, who received the Law and Commandments from God, Serapion was honoured to bear and to “erect” the icon of the Transfiguration, “where God is depicted in the flesh for veneration and prayers of the believers and for performing healing and other miracles” (Georgian Literature 1987, pp. 639-682; Chubinashvili, 1959, p.31).<sup>7</sup> Further on we read of several miracles performed by the icon.

Somewhat later example is an icon of the Virgin Haghiosoritissa from Khobi (Fig. 3), (Georgian State Museum of Fine Arts, 55x43cm, painting of the eighteenth or nineteenth century, silver-gilt, cloisonné enamel). This icon demonstrates the same type of revetment where whole surface is “hidden” by a repoussé cover and only the painted face is visible. Regrettably the painting of icon is lost. The repoussé cover depicts the Virgin in half-length, turned to the right, with her head slightly inclined and her hands in a traditional gesture of prayer. The Georgian inscription beneath the figure of the Virgin, executed in *asomtavruli*, says: “Christ, the most-holy Mother of God, intercede before Christ for the soul of King Leon”. The person mentioned in the inscription is identified as Leon the Third (957-967) and it is assumed that an icon created for the salvation of king’s soul

must have been executed after his death, about 970 (Chubinashvili, 1959, pp. 573-579, figs.: 63-65). The features of the metal relief of this icon, which should be considered as an example of court art, reveal the advanced tendencies of its time. The character of the embossing demonstrates the important achievements in the depiction of the plasticity of the figure. At the same time the icon attracts by the particular decorative effect of the ornamental frame, where enamel medallions with holy images are inserted. The reverse of the icon is also covered with a silver revetment. The decoration of this side of the icon consists of the Cross of Golgotha erected on a four-stepped base with the sigla IC XC NIKA. The inscription on the reverse of the icon states that the back was revetted with silver during the reign of David Narin (1245-1293) by Bedan Dadiani, Eristavi and Mandaturtukhutzesi, (a high dignitary in medieval Georgia responsible for internal affairs) and his wife Khvashak.

The representation of the Mother of God in supplication on King Leon's icon from Khobi is an early replica of the highly venerated Constantinopolitan icon associated with Hagia Soros in Chalkoprateia, where a precious Christian relic, the girdle of the Virgin, was housed. The depiction of the Virgin Hagiosoritissa, which is linked to the eschatological theme of the Deesis, on an icon created for the redemption of the soul of a Georgian king might be explained by the special relationship between a popular icon and services for the dead. It has been recently suggested that the icon of the Virgin Hagiosoritissa had a funerary character. Moreover, there is a theory, which identifies "*signon tes presbeias*" mentioned in the description of the memorial service in the typicon of the Pantocrator monastery (1136) with the Hagiosoritissa icon (Chryssanti Baltoyanni, 2000, pp. 148-149). This suggestion is strengthened by the frescoes of Sopocani (1260-1265) where the funeral procession of the first Serbian king Stefan Nemanja is accompanied by an icon of the Virgin Hagiosoritissa (Sevcenko, 1991, p. 55, fig. 24). It seems quite likely that the lavishly adorned icon of Khobi with a supplication for the soul of King Leon had a certain connection with specific funerary or commemorative services. Another document, the typicon of the Kosmosoteira Monastery (1152) indirectly supports this hypothesis. The founder of the monastery Sebastokrator Isaac Komnenos "framed with an ornament of gold and silver" an icon of the Virgin Kosmosoteira from Rhaidestos. According to Isaac's will he desired this icon which had been sent to him down from heaven, together with an icon of Christ, to be set on his tomb, where "... it should remain

resting throughout all times... to mediate for my wretched soul” (Byzantine Monastic Foundation, v. 2, p. 839). It is true that we do not know what type of Virgin image was depicted on Isaac’s icon, but an association between these two icons seems quite plausible since both images, belonging to the imperial family, were decorated with precious metal and were regarded as icons with special functions.

An interesting example of family patronage is represented by the Deesis icons from Mgvimevi, attributed to the early eleventh century. (Fig. 4) (87x67cm, painting, gilt silver, Georgian State Museum Sh. Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts, Chubinashvili, 1959, pp. 598-600, figs. 68-70, 79). The Deesis consists of three “completely revetted” icons depicting Christ, the Virgin and John the Baptist in half-length. Eristavt Eristavi of Racha (northwestern Georgia) Rati and his wife Rusudan adorned these icons. Unfortunately, today we have only the embossed parts of the icon (the painted faces we see now are additions of the eighteenth or nineteenth century): namely, the metal sheathing, covering the central part, the figures and the “fields” around them as well as the ornamental borders of the icon. Well-composed figures and ornamentation, consisting of exquisitely curling leaves, reveal the hand of a skilful master. As becomes clear from the beautiful two-line donors’ asomtavruli inscriptions placed in the lower part of the icons, Rati adorned the icons of Christ and John the Baptist while his wife had chosen the Virgin as her personal protector, and as we read in the inscription the icon of the Virgin was adorned “with the gold of the queen of queens Rusudan” (Chubinashvili, 1959, pp. 592-599; Chichinadze, 2000, p. 26).<sup>8</sup> The function and original place of these icons in church is not clear for us today, but the subject and size of the Mgvimevi set permits us to suppose that they were initially placed on a chancel barrier (templon).

Two other Georgian icons should be mentioned among “completely revetted icons”. Both represent Christ Pantokrator, and one comes from Tzageri and the other from Tzalenjikha (respectively 87x57cm, gilt silver, 72,5x52,5 cm, gilt silver, niello. Both are now in the Georgian State Museum Sh. Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts, Chubinashvili, 1959, pp.182-190, fig. 99, 100, and p. 579-584, figs.80, 81). As usual, only the silver revetments of these adorned images are preserved. The inscription on the Tzageri icon (Fig. 5) executed in repoussé on the right inner strap and connecting the frame and the “field” of the icon says: “Saviour of all [born] creatures, glorify with your glory the divinely crowned powerful Bagrat king of the Abkhazians and Kouropalatis of the entire East. Amen”

(Chubinashvili, 1959, p.189). G. Chubinashvili attributes the icon to the beginning of the eleventh century, since “Bagrat the King” is identified with Bagrat III (975-1074) who received the title Kourapalatis in 1001. On both icons we have frontally depicted repoussé half-length figures of the Saviour with a traditional blessing gesture and a closed Gospel in his left hand. The carpet-like ornamental field and the frame with additional images (three medallions with frontal busts of angels are placed in the centre and corners of the upper border; the Virgin and John the Baptist depicted in three-quarter view are placed on the left and right vertical borders respectively; the lower border is missing) inserted in the ornamental pattern, a double rowed foliate motive, gives a restricted splendour to the Tzageri icon.

The second icon of Christ from Tzalenjikha attracts attention by its brilliance and refined artistic taste. This beautiful icon, with a sculpturally portrayed monumental figure of Christ, is richly embellished with repoussé and niello ornaments. Gold ornamentation on the black niello background decorates Christ’s halo and the borders of the icon. Enamel medallions create additional colourful accents and create a particular decorative effect. Originally the icon had ten large figurative, and ten small ornamental, medallions. Today only two enamel medallions survive on the upper border: a central medallion with a frontal Christ and St. John the Baptist in the left corner.

The Tzalenjikha icon, one of the masterpieces of Georgian medieval silversmithing reveals a characteristic feature of Georgian medieval repoussé, namely a striking synthesis of plasticity and decorativeness. A sliding revetted back (42 cm. wide) containing relics of the True Cross was added to the icon in the thirteenth century. The receptacles for relics, one cruciform and several small and rectangular, are accompanied by painted images of Constantine the Great and Empress Helen. The repoussé decoration of the reverse is composed of the flat Cross of Golgotha and an *asomtavruli* donor’s inscription above the horizontal arms. The inscription belongs to a representative of an influential Georgian feudal families, the Dadiani: “Son of God, only born divine and inseparable from the Holy Spirit, prolong the days of Giorgi Dadiani and make him worthy of beatitude in both lives, and may he be a protector and a guide for the son of my brother (nephew)” (Chubinashvili, 1959, p. 581, 480-482). We don’t have any historical evidences to this icon, but the high artistic and technical mastery of the exquisitely decorated rich covering, together with the revetted back and the relics of the True Cross, make it clear that the Tzalenjikha icon was a significant example of “court art”. At the



same time it must have been one of the most highly venerated images at least between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. It should be mentioned that prototype of the Pantocrator and the icon of the Virgin Aghiosoritissa (discussed above) was a Constantinopolitan miracle-working icon and served as an “imperial icon” (Chryssanti Baltoyanni, 2000, pp. 147-149).

A number of noteworthy “adorned” icons dating to the eleventh or thirteenth centuries bear donors’ inscriptions reflecting their commissioners’ votive intention. Most of the commissioners of adorned icons or rich metal coverings for painted images were of elevated rank, as in the case of the kings who adorned icons with precious adornment we have just discussed: Bagrat III Kouropalates (954-1014) commissioned an icon of Christ; David IV the Builder (1089-1125) and his son Demetre I (1125-1154) contributed to the creation of a lavishly decorated setting, a triptych, for the famous enamel image of the Virgin Hagiosoritissa, from Khakhuli dated to the tenth century; Queen Tamar (1189-1213) ordered a precious metal adornment for the sixth or seventh century miracle-working icon of the Holy Face of Edessa from Ancha (Fig.1); David V was the donor of a small triptych dated to 1253-1263 (now lost) with double-sided repoussé revetment where the central image of the Virgin and Child was accompanied by his portrait. (Amiranashvili, 1972; Papapmastoraki, 2002, pp. 225-254; Amiranashvili, 1956, pp. 7-27; Chichinadze, 1996, p. 71, fig. 9;). High dignitaries and members of powerful feudal families, high ecclesiastics: bishops, archbishops, metropolitans, as well as monks were among the commissioners of such icons <sup>9</sup>. The supplicatory inscriptions reveal that ordinary believers also contributed to the creation of metal icon covers or also adorned icons. We have one example of collective donorship when a whole community, the inhabitants of valley of Svipi, adorned an icon of Gabriel Archangel (thirteenth or fourteenth century) (Takaishvili, 1937, p.194, N 20; Chichinadze, 2000, p. 28).

The standard formulae of these repoussé supplicatory inscriptions that were placed either on the lower borders of an icon or its reverse, were executed in asomtavruli Georgian script. They are addressed in slightly varying terms to the sacred personages represented (mostly Christ, the Virgin, John the Baptist) and state that the donor embellished (clad, revetted, embossed in silver or gold) an image on behalf of deceased or living members of their families, for the atonement of their sins and for the salvation of (his and/or their) souls. According to the inscriptions placed on Georgian revetted

icons, their precious metal decoration could be attributed to the so called “psychika” or “proactive offerings dedicated for the salvation of the soul” made to holy images by believers (Vikan, 1995, p. 571, Mundell Mango, 1986, p. 5).

The importance attached to the metal adornment of holy images was clearly expressed in the supplicatory inscription on the Saviour icon from Pkhotreri with repoussé cladding. A painted image of Christ received a beautiful silver-gilt repoussé ornamental field and frame, stolen in 1936. Now only the wooden panel with small fragments of Christ’s repoussé silver halo is left (the icon painting is completely rubbed away as well) (Takaishvili, 1937, p. 416, No 10; Chichinadze, 1989, p. 25). An eloquent inscription stated that Queen Rusudan (“daughter of Demetrios, sister of king and the sun of kings, George, daughter-in law of the sultan”) could not fulfil her intention to adorn the icon because of her death. She begs the Lord to accept the gift (the icon), which was completed by Tamar, her niece (who was raised by her) with donations prepared by Rusudan (it is not quite clear, however, from the text what was meant by “donation”, whether it was material or money). In this connection it is worth quoting Chapter 20 of the Backovo typicon (“Concerning lay people who give money in the holy church for liturgies to be held for the dead”), which states that offerings “serve ...to benefit the souls for whom they are brought as well as those who offer them” (Byzantine Monastic. v. 2, chapter XX, p. 544). In this light the eloquent inscription on Rusudan’s icon acquires a new meaning and makes it clearer why the text says in detail why and by whom this image was embellished.

Completely revetted icons when just the painted faces of sacred personages are left uncovered could be interpreted in a variety of ways. It could be assumed that this practice reveals a linkage between icon revetments and precious metal reliquaries. The early Christian cult of martyrs and their relics might be perceived in the practice of covering holy images with precious metal. It is generally agreed that the cult of icons was closely linked to the cult of martyrs and it has been suggested that icon revetments belong to the tradition of creating precious receptacles, or reliquaries, for holy relics (Kitzinger, 1954, pp. 83-151, spec. pp.115-119; Grabar, 1946, v.2, pp. 343-357).

Double-sided revetments on medieval Georgian icons increase the links between images and relics. The compositional structure of the repoussé reverses of our icons is characterised by a standard scheme. Supplicatory inscriptions are placed around the Cross of

Golgotha, or are inscribed in quatrefoils. Double-sided revetment occurs on separate icons (i.e. the tenth century Virgin Hagiosoritissa icon from Khobi, the icon of Christ from Tzalenjikha, the thirteenth century Hagiosoritissa icon from Nesgun (Fig. 7), another small thirteenth century icon of the Virgin Hagiosoritisa from Ushguli, the late thirteenth or fourteenth century icon of the Virgin and Child from Ushguli, etc.) and on images incorporated in triptychs (the thirteenth century Virgine Hodegetria icon placed in the central part of a triptych of the Palaiologos period in the Historical-Ethnographic Museum of Mestia, or the St John the Baptist inserted into a triptych of the second half of the thirteenth century from Labskald) (Takaishvili, 1937, p. 174, No 18). Numerous small-scale triptychs dated to between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries have double-sided silver sheathing: the now lost Triptych of king David V, 1252-1263, the triptych with the Virgin Hagiosoritisa from Ushguli, the thirteenth or the fourteenth century triptych with the Passion of Christ from Ushguli (Fig. 8), the fourteenth century triptych with Prophet Elijah from Ushguli, etc.) (Chichinadze, 1996, p.71, figs; 6-9). These triptychs in their turn could be associated with Christian enkolpions, precious objects with apotropaic functions, made from gold, or silver and often decorated with enamel and/or niello (and sometimes containing relics), which apparently reflect the same approach to the sacred images as to relics.

It has been argued here that the repoussé revetments of medieval Georgian icons with donors' supplicatory inscriptions belong to the same category as "public images", miracle working-images, title icons of churches, and templon images displayed for public veneration. By the embellishment of "public images" special, more personal links between donor and sacred object were established. Donations of money or precious material allowed the commissioners of the revetment to declare his or her role in praising the holy image and accordingly its prototype. The act of adorning of images was at the same time a manifestation of the donor's particular status. The commissioning of embellishment with donors' names, their titles, and sometimes their origins, brought them closer to images and accordingly to the depicted holy protector. By integrating prayers of supplication that included names on the revetments of venerable icons, the donor became incorporated into both public and private veneration and thus was, appropriately represented in the liturgy. Such a "permanent presence" of donor by the placing of their prayers in visible places ensured their permanent commemoration during

church services. It is appropriate to remember the words in the embossed inscription on the Khakhuli triptych comparing the creation of the precious mount for an icon of the Virgin with the workmanship of the Biblical Bezaleel, who embellished the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus: 31) (Amiranashvili, 1956, pp. 39). According to this inscription, the provision of icons with precious mounts goes beyond personal necessity and acquires a wider, missionary character.

The Christian custom of sheathing images in precious metal is another widespread custom of interaction between “the holy” and believers. The metal revetments of icons expressing supplicatory prayer in both verbal and material forms, recall sanctuary barriers or the meeting point of heavenly and earthly worlds, which according to Patriarch Germanos (“*Historia Mistagogica*”) “denotes the place of prayer” (Mango, 1986, p. 143;).

The wealth of survived Georgian medieval icons with repoussé revetment, which demonstrate a great variety of types and iconographic formulae of precious metal adornment, allow us to suggest that Georgian medieval artists contributed to the development of the artistic language and forms of this type of icon. The high artistic level and technical quality achieved, the elaborate theological programmes of the icons’ revetments, which entirely respond to the purpose of the metal votive offering demonstrate that the Byzantine tradition of cladding painted images in silver, adopted by Georgian artists found an extremely fertile local soil. Georgian medieval masters are far from being simple provincial copyists of the Byzantine models, as it is usually admitted, but the centuries-long tradition of metalwork (which extends from the Bronze Age, through the Middle Ages, until modern times), and the advanced artistic tendencies that can be traced in eleventh and thirteenth century Georgian art, stimulated original creativity and the re-interpretation of Byzantine originals. Further research in this direction will enable us to explore issues concerning the impact of the Georgian medieval art of metalwork on the development of this branch of Christian Orthodox art.

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## Notes

1. Similarities can be noted in the terminology used in Antiquity and Byzantine times for such offerings. As A. M. Talbot argues the term used in the Manuel Philes' epigram referring to an ex-voto precious metal adornment of the Virgin Zoodochos Pege *sostron* (*ek chrysargyron*) was used in antiquity for thank-offerings to the god Asklepios in gratitude for healing. (Talbot,1994, p.154);

2. The significance of gold as well as of silver appears throughout the Old Testament. According to Exodus God commanded Moses to collect silver and gold (together with bronze, purple wool etc.) in order to make a sanctuary where the Lord will dwell, according to the divine order all the furniture of sanctuary was made from gold and silver (Exodus: 25: 2-4, 8-9, 11; see also Exodus chapters: 26, 28, 30, 36; Numbers: 10: 1 - 2, etc.). The sacred meaning of gold is also stressed in the description of the Temple of Solomon (Kings III, 6:21-22; 28-35 etc.). For the understanding of the symbolism of icon revetments we should refer to the Gospel description of Adoration of Magi (Matthew 2; 11). We read that wise men worshipped a "young child" and "presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh". These gifts brought to the infant Jesus acknowledge his divinity and power. Thus these gifts acquire special meaning and likewise, they were offered to sacred images: icons are adorned with precious metal covers, they are censed and candles are lit before them as a sign of reverence and piety. As Basil the Great says: "The honour (shown) to the image is conveyed to its prototype".

3. See Christ's words (John: 8; 12): "I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" The Gospel of John emphasizes that the presence of God is light: "And the light shined in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not" (John: 1; 5; see also John 12:35-36). In Exodus we read, that the glory of Lord was "...like devouring fire on the top of the mountain" (Ex.: 24; 17) etc. For gold symbolism in Byzantine theology see Averintzev,1979, pp. 47-67;

4. Rule of Michael Attaleitas for his Almshouse in Rhaidestos and for the Monastery of Christ Pantocrator, 1077; Typicon of Empress Irene Doukaina Komnena for the Convent of the Mother of God Kecharitomene in Constantinople, 110-16; Typicon of the

Sebastokrator Isaac Komnenos for the Monastery of the Mother of God Kosmosoteira near Bera, 1152; Inventory of Maximos for the Monastery of the Mother of God at Skoteina near Philadelphia, 1247; Inventory of the Monastery of the Mother of God Eleouse near Stroumitza, 1449; Inventory of St. John Monastery of Patmos, 1200; (Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents, 2000, v. 1, p. 357, v. 2, p. 715, 839, v. 3, p. 1186, v.4, p. 1671; C. Mango, 1986, pp. 238-239).

5. Late 13th c icon of the Virgin Aghiosoritissa from Freising, mosaic icons from Vatopedi - one with St. Anna and the Virgin and another with Crucifixion mosaic icon, both are dated to the end of the 13th early 14th c, mosaic icon of John the Evangelist from Lavra, Athos, the end of the 13th c, Mandylion from Genoa 14th c Annunciation icons from Ochrid, Christ Pantocrator Psychosostis and the Virgin Hodegetria Psychosostria, 14th, c, Skopje, etc. (Grabar, 1975, p. 41, no.16, fig. 39; p. 53, N 23, fig. 60, p. 52, N 22, fig. 53-59, p. 62, No. 33. Fig. 71-72; p.35, No.10, fig. 26-29; p. 38, N 12, 13, fig. 31-32)

6. For Svaneti school of icons see Weitzmann, et al. 1992, pp. 119, 123, 124

7. According to one version Basil - a nephew of Serapion, was a superior of the monastery of Zarzma in 916-926, while there is another theory attributing the events described in the Life to the seventh and eighth centuries (Chubinashvili, 1959, p.31).

8. Rati Eristavi and members of his family were the commissioners of several other "adorned" icons kept in the Georgian State Museum of Fine Arts. According to the supplicatory inscription Rati contributed to the adornment of the icon of Crucifixion (20x15 cm, gilt silver, the present poorly painted icon a later addition), his wife Rusudan adorned an icon of Christ (105x78 cm. silver-gilt, painting of the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). Rati's father, Kakhaber Eristavi, who later became a monk under the name of Kirile (Cyril), commissioned an icon of Christ (97,5x73 cm, silver-gilt, painting). He is mentioned in the fragmentary supplicatory inscription of another icon. The icon is not preserved, but it is clear from the text that it depicted the Crucifixion (Chubinashvili, 1959,. pp. 592-599; Chichinadze, 2000, p. 26)

9. Inscriptions on decorated icons have preserved the names of the following representatives of medieval Georgian aristocracy: Giorgi

Dadiani, Beshken Amirajibi, Sasan and Vamek Vardanisdze, Vardan Inasaridze, etc. A twelfth century icon of Christ with repoussé revetment was commissioned by Symeon Metropolitan of Chkondidi, the monk Khosha adorned a thirteenth century icon of the Virgin Vlachernitissa (Chubinashvili, 1959, p. 619; (Takaishvili, 1937, p. 194, No 20; Chichinadze, 2000, pp. 27-28, pp. 26-27; 1996 p. 67, notes: No 8 and 17 with earlier bibliography; 1989, pp. 128-138)



Fig. 1. Anchiskhati Triptych; painting 6th- 7 th century; Mandylion icon revetment late twelfth or early thirteenth century; wings fourteenth century.





Fig. 2. Revetment of Transfiguration icon from Zarzma, AD 886.



Fig. 3. Revetment of the icon of the Virgin Hagiosorotissa from Khobi, about AD 970.



Fig. 4. Revetment of the icon of Christ from a Deesis, Mgvimevi, late 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> c.



Fig. 5. Revetment of the Saviour icon from Tzalendjikha, 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

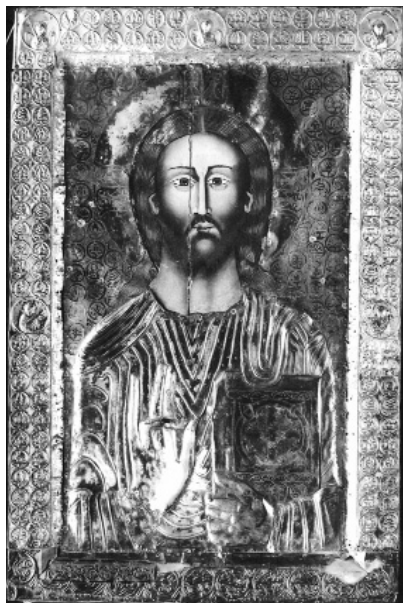


Fig. 6. Revetment of Saviour icon commissioned by King Bagrat III from Tzageri, late 10<sup>th</sup>- early 11<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig. 7. Reverse of the Virgin Agiosoritssa icon, early 14<sup>th</sup> c.

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