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# Sasanian Fantastic Creature “Pasku(n)č” in Material Culture of Christian Georgia

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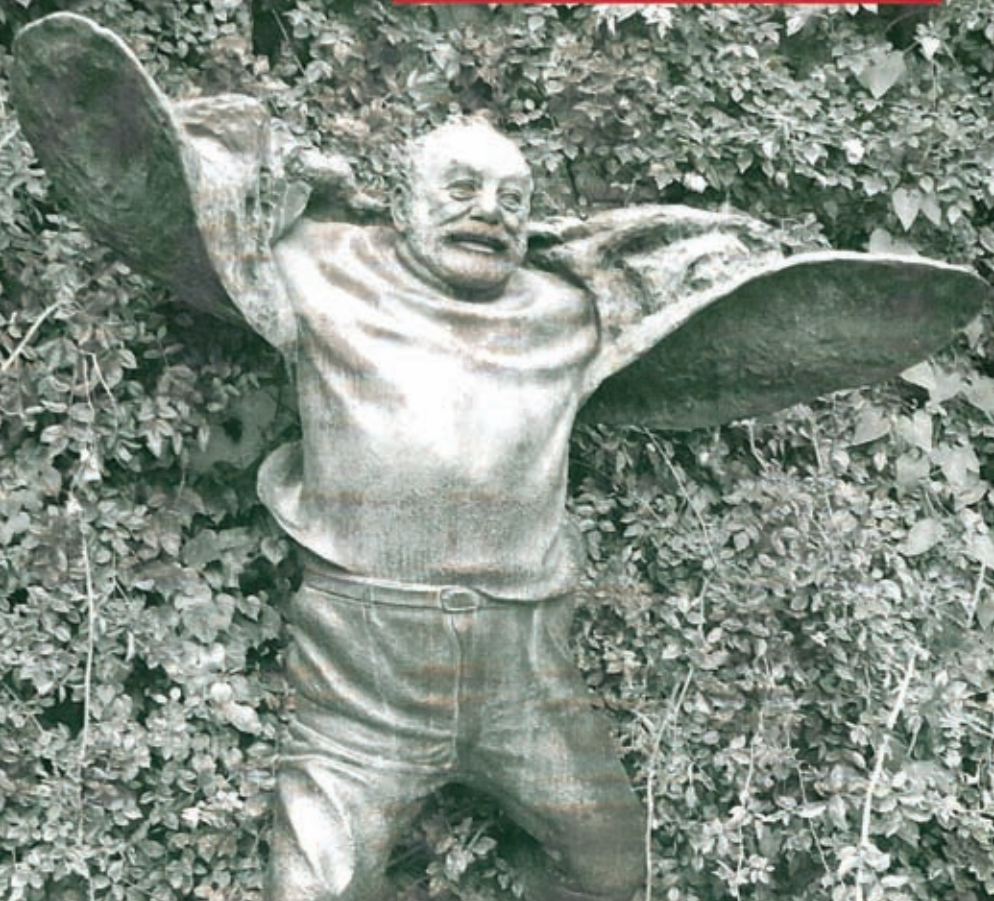
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Band 13



Dato Barbakadse, Jürgen Trinks (Hg.)

**Chancen und Schwierigkeiten  
des interkulturellen Dialogs über  
ästhetische Fragen**

Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der  
Entwicklungen in der Kaukasusregion

LIT

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Umschlagbild: Skulptur S. Paradjanows in Tibilisi, © Maria Fürst

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## 12. Sasanian Fantastic Creature Baškuč (\*Pasku(n)č) in Georgian Christian Culture

Irma MATIASHVILI, HELEN GIUNASHVILI (TBILISI)

Abstract: The paper aims to investigate a representative and philosophic-symbolic significance of ancient Iranian fantastic creature “*pasku(n)č*” – “griffin”, “supernatural bird”, integrated in Christian Georgian art, being an essential attribute of reliefs on Medieval Georgian architectural monuments. Zoomorphic figures, which was a rather characteristic facet of the Georgian art from Early Christian times, reflected ancient Iranian cultural influences, but these zoomorphic reliefs were created by Georgian craftsmen with national compositional art forms, incarnating the main traits of Christian symbolic thought. New representative trends of zoomorphic beings including *paskunč*, were established in the second half of Xth century and has remained as the topical theme in the Georgian art during several decades. During the above-mentioned period the fantastic creature *pasku(n)č* was depicted according to the canons of Ancient Christian art: it is directed to the center, represented in pairs, having royal attributes. At the same time, new features are also revealed in its depiction: connection to high architectural areas and location on façade’s upper level. In this respect, *pasku(n)č*’s symbolic content refers to sacral area.

It is clear, that the most ancient fantastic image, penetrated in Georgian culture through Iranian, retained its functional attribute, acquiring new distinctive features, which resulted in a different cultural context.

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Beitrag soll nach einer kennzeichnenden und philosophisch-symbolischen Bedeutung des alten iranischen Phantasiegeschöpfes „*pasku(n)č* (Greif) gesucht werden, den die christliche georgische Kunst aufgenommen und zu einem wesentlichen Attribut von Reliefs an mittelalterlichen Bauwerken Georgiens gemacht hat. Zwar spiegeln diese für die georgische Kunst kennzeichnenden zoomorphischen Figuren den altiranischen Einfluss wider, aber die georgischen Bildhauer fügten ihnen Formen aus der nationalen Kunst hinzu, welche die wichtigsten Züge des christlichen Symboldenkens verkörpern. Neue kennzeichnende Entwicklungen von zoomorphischen Wesen wie dem *pasku(n)č* entstanden in der zweiten Hälfte des 10. Jahrhunderts und blieben für mehrere Jahrhunderte ein Topos. Während jener Periode wurde der *pasku(n)č* entsprechend des Kanons der frühchristlichen Kunst dargestellt: er ist mit königlichen Attributen ausgestattet, auf das Zentrum hin gerichtet und paarweise dargestellt. Gleichzeitig sind auch neue Züge seiner Darstellung zu entdecken, nämlich sein Bezug zu höheren Bereichen des Bauwerks und seine Positionierung im oberen Fassadenbereich. In dieser Hinsicht weist der symbolische Gehalt des *pasku(n)č* auf das Sakrale. Das älteste phantastische Bildwerk, das aus der iranischen in die georgische Kultur einging, behielt zwar die Attribute seines ursprünglichen Zweckes, bekam aber neue Kennzeichen, die aus einem anderen kulturellen Kontext entstanden.



## 12. Sasanian Fantastic Creature *Baškuč* (\*Pasku(n)č) in Georgian Christian Culture

Historical accounts of pre-Islamic Persia and East Georgia, attested in classical sources as Iberian kingdom (III c BC – IV c AD) and known later as the state of Kartli, reveal the most ancient tradition. The geographic position of both countries has supported the existence of practically uninterrupted interrelations of these neighboring regions from the remotest past. The spreading of Iranian culture in Ancient Georgia (Iberia) has already been clearly distinguished from the Achaemenid period (VI–IV cc BC), when firm foundations of Iranian statehood were laid. Iranian beneficial influences became more intensive in later periods, such as Hellenistic (IV–III cc BC), Parthian (III c BC–III c AD) and, particularly, Sasanian (III–VII cc AD) periods.

Sasanian dominance on Georgia was deep and strong from the very beginning, including all the spheres of social and cultural life of the country affecting therefore different sides of pre- and Christian Georgian culture throughout the whole Sasanian era. Traces of influences exerted by Sasanians were mostly revealed in Medieval Georgian culture.

Rich archaeological materials, epigraphic monuments, historical sources and distinguished artifacts reached to us attest the diversity of Iranian-Georgian cultural ties.

The present paper aims to investigate a representative symbolic significance of Iranian fantastic creature *baškuč* (\**pasku(n)č*) “griffin”, “supernatural bird” integrated in Christian Georgian spiritual and material culture.

This zoomorphic being presents one of various forms, established in Georgia due to Sasanian enriching influences. It is reflected in different fields of national creativeness: written monuments, folklore, monumental, plastic and decorative art. This symbol, which originated from the Ancient Orient already occurs in pre-Christian Georgian art (Bagineti, Uplitsikhe, Zghuderi) (Machabeli 1983, ill. 4; Khakhutaishvili 1999, 24; Braund, Javakhishvili, Nemsadze 2009, 93-97).

The term denoting a griffin, fantastic, mythological creature – *p'ask'unji*, *paskuji* is already attested in the most ancient Georgian literary sources, such as the Old Georgian translations of the Scripture (Vc AD), epigraphic monuments, Georgian versions of Greek liturgical texts dated by XI century and is originated in Sasanian (Zoroastrian Middle Persian) *baškuč*, or (Manichaean Middle Persian) *paškuč*.<sup>1</sup> Corresponding to the Georgian *p'ask'unji* (later *pask'unji*) forms

<sup>1</sup> The prototype of these forms is reconstructed as \**pasku(n)č* (Buyaner 2005, 28) The most ancient Georgian translations of the Septuagint, known as the Oshki manuscript dated by V c AD, reveal the form *p'ask'unji* (=  $\gamma\rho\acute{\upsilon}\psi$  (Deut. 14:13)) while other later versions of the Georgian translations attest *pask'uji*, *pask'unji*, (the textual data is available on Titus's server database (ht [tp://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/indexe.htm](http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/indexe.htm)). Its contextual synonyms in the Georgian versions of the Bible are *qanči* and *qurči* – “sea-eagle” (Buyaner 2005, 26). The primary form could be *paskuj-*, (as it was attested in XI c epigraphy and liturgical texts) and its variations – *pask'uj-ip'ask'uj-*, penetrated in Old Georgian from Zoroastrian or Manichaean Middle Persian. Nasalization in

## 12. Sasanian Fantastic Creature Baškuč (\*Pasku(n)č) in Georgian Christian Culture

are revealed in Svanian as well in other languages of the South Caucasus (Ossetic, Armenian) (Buyaner 2005, 19–30; Giunashvili 2006, 188–198, 232; Giunashvili 2011 40–42).<sup>2</sup>

In spite of different aspects of Sasanian cultural influences revealed in Early Christian Georgian material culture, symbolic character of *pask'unji* is wholly represented in Medieval Christian monuments.

From this period, namely from the second half of the Xth century could be traced regional widespread of this zoomorphic being, with its symbolic meaning and contextual diversity. Important aspect is that a stone relief of this period attests the most ancient written specimen – on the cathedral of Nikortsminda, dated by 1014 year<sup>3</sup> one of the figures has the inscription “*paskuji*”. The architectural relief mostly incarnated the symbolic meaning of the *pask'unji*.

Survival of this ancient oriental cult in the Georgian relief is related to Tao-Klarjeti architectural school.<sup>4</sup> On façade reliefs of Khakhuli<sup>5</sup> and Oshki<sup>6</sup> churches (dated by the second half of X c) the figure of *pask'unji* is organically included in zoomorphic beings' variety.

In reliefs of Khakhuli *pask'unji* appears as independent, a single-figure composition [ill.1.Giviashvili 2004, 144], as well as thematic composition – a part of the scene of “Ascension of Alexander the Macedonian” [ill.2].<sup>7</sup> Both reliefs are decorations of the church's south portico, consequently connected to the entrance. In spite of certain damage of the figures, their common features, which are their typological characteristics, are well distinguished. These are winged fantastic creatures having a lion's body and ears and a head of an eagle.<sup>8</sup>

A single-figure composition of *pask'unji* is characterized by a stylized ending, a leaf-lined tail and by a ribbon tied on the neck, the symbol originated in Zoroastrian culture.

Like the Khakhuli reliefs, figures of *pask'unji* are attested in different contexts on the Oshki church facades (Matiashvili 2012, 96–107). In Khakhuli reliefs are adorning the entrance, while in Oshki *pask'unjis* are bounded to the most signifi-

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the consonant complex *sk/sk'/ (paskuj/p'ask'uj > pask/k'unj-)* is of later period.

<sup>2</sup> The Georgian, Svanian and Ossetic folk-tales, in which this fantastic bird appears, represent the well-known motif of a journey of the main hero between the nether world and the earth achieved with the help of the bird (Eliade 1964, 477–482). Mythological *pask'unji* also frequently figures in the Georgian translations of Iranian epic masterpieces, namely the Georgian versions of “Shah-Name”, where it corresponds to Persian *Simurγ*.

<sup>3</sup> The cathedral of Nikortsminda is located in mountain region of Western Georgia – Racha.

<sup>4</sup> The historical region of Tao-Klarjeti province is for the present on the territory of Turkey.

<sup>5</sup> The Khakhuli church is situated in historical Tao-Klarjeti.

<sup>6</sup> The Oshki church (963-973 years) is on the territory of historical Tao.

<sup>7</sup> The above-mentioned relief with the scene of Ascension of Alexander the Great is one of the examples in the Medieval Georgian art.

<sup>8</sup> The relief is also damaged in this part and it makes impossible a detailed attribution.

cant Christian architectural symbols in the church – a dome [ill.3] and a window's frame<sup>9</sup> [ill.4]. In the first case, the figure is included in zoomorphic range,<sup>10</sup> while in the other case – in the window's frame relief.

In the dome's frieze this fantastic creature is incorporated among real animal beings and depicted only with a head and a part of the neck. On the western façade's window frame a couple of *pask'unjis* are totally represented as creatures with a lion's body and an eagle's head.

It could be assumed while considering these forms, that *pask'unji* on the dome's friezes is reflecting the frame's form. Apart of their bodily constitution, these figures also have some other characteristic attributes, such as half-pelmet ending tails<sup>11</sup> and three-partial hangers<sup>12</sup> in their beaks, being originally ancient oriental royal and divine signs (Djobadze 1992, 171).

These attributes of the Oshki *pask'unjis* could be considered as a typical ceremonial symbols of Tao-Klarjeti architectural school, as they are also distinguished in the same region – on Parkhali church façade reliefs, in depictions of coupled birds and on Oshki itself, on "Deisis" composition of south façade, embroidered *pask'unjis* on the garment of the Georgian king David Kurapatat are holding the same hanger in their beaks (Aladashvili 1977, 114).

In the following period figures of *pask'unji* occur first in plain regions of Western Georgia (such as Martvili,<sup>13</sup> Bagrati<sup>14</sup>) as well as in mountains (Nikortsminda), and then in Eastern Georgian architectural monuments (Samtavisi,<sup>15</sup> Ruisi<sup>16</sup>). In all mentioned monuments their thematic context is differentiated, which generally specifies meaning of this symbolic figure.

Like Oshki's dome, in Martvili cathedral the figure of *pask'unji* is incorporated in the frieze<sup>17</sup> [ill.5], with the difference that here the frieze is created according to Christian iconographic compositions: Annunciation, Saint Eustache's

<sup>9</sup> On the particular symbolic significance of a window's frame in the Georgian art see Gedevanishvili 2012.

<sup>10</sup> On the entrance top of the Ishkhani minor church a griffin is represented among zoomorphic figures of an arched frieze.

<sup>11</sup> This detail is clearly distinguishable as the figure is well preserved unlike the griffin on Khakhuli.

<sup>12</sup> This attribute has the most ancient tradition in the Georgian art and occurs on Early Christian monument – the relief of Satkhi (V-VI cc AD), where a pair of peacocks are depicted with decorations in their beaks.

<sup>13</sup> The cathedral of Martvili is situated in Western Megrelia (West Georgia).

<sup>14</sup> The cathedral of Bagrati was completed in 1003 year and is located in Kutaisi.

<sup>15</sup> Samtavisi cathedral is on the territory of historical inner Kartli.

<sup>16</sup> Ruisi cathedral is a Medieval architectural monument situated in Kartli.

<sup>17</sup> There are two different opinions on the date of Martvili raised friezes. R. Schermerling and G. Abramishvili attributed them to the period of the cathedral's renovation (X c), while N. Aladashvili and T. Khundadze considered them as belonging to the initial building period (VIIc).

hunting. It is also typical in the frieze that *pask'unji's* figure is turned back from the main depictions, and distinguished by this from all other figures. *Pask'unji* on Martvili is related by its typological and royal attributes to *pask'unjis* represented on Khakhuli and Oshki. This figure is also created as a synthetic form of a lion and an eagle, having knotted ribbon on its neck.

*Pask'unji* on Bagrati cathedral's capital is also depicted in figurative context, [ill.6] being a part of two-figured composition. Here *pask'unji* holds in his claws a fantastic four-legged creature with a female head, but by its general characteristics, it belongs to the considered group of *pask'unjis*. Its attributes (the royal hanger in the beak, presumably the tail ended in a plant motives-style) is analogical with the *pask'unjis* of Tao-Klarjeti. Symbolic meaning of the composition requires further investigations and precisions, however its essential sign is clear-the scene presents the domination of one figure over other, either reflects the capture, or seizing.

The Bagrati cathedral in Kutaisi was the royal donation. Beside its general character the Bagrati cathedral also resembles the Oshki thanks to the motif of the *pask'unji*. It should be noted that the donors of the Oshki were the ruler family of Bagrationi as well.

Considered relief figures of the *pask'unji* present a single phenomenon for each church. But in Nikortsminta cathedral, being distinguished by abundance of reliefs, the *pask'unji's* figure is particularly frequent: on the dome's frieze, the window's frame and the portico's arch. By depictions on the dome's lower frieze [ill.7] and arch of window's frame reliefs of Nikortsminda (Aladashvili 1977, 157) are mostly close to Oshki facades' decoration principles. Like Oshki facades, figures are ranged there in couples, facing one another. Plant stylized tails are also visible, and *pask'unjis* depicted on the base of the arch have decorated ribbons on their necks. Exactly here is incised the Georgian inscription ("*paskuji*") (Aladashvili 1977, 225).

Unlike all the above-mentioned monuments *pask'unji* represented on Samtavisi cathedral's (1030 year) east façade is rather monumental and distinguished by its 'independent character'. (Matiashvili 2010, 305; Matiashvili, 2011, 305). It is integrated in Early Christian symbolic of crosses and plant motives depicted on the façade [ill. 8]. The figure of *pask'unji* is definitely turned to the façade's center, where the most important symbol of Christianity the huge Cross dominated the whole surface. Scale of *pask'unji* is corresponding with this Cross and surpassing significantly vegetal forms. Its particular significance in the façade's whole system is defined by this sign. It is typical that the figure of *pask'unji* on Samtavisi cathedral in front of it had an analogous, symmetric matching part, which existed till the midst of XIX c on the façade's flatness (Gordeev 1926, 401). Typologically and by its attributive divine Zoroastrian ribbon, it is

completely similar to existing figures on Georgian monuments of different regions.

*Pask'unjis* on the eastern façade of another Georgian monument, Ruisi cathedral [ill. 9] by their general characteristics belong to the common group of the Georgian *pask'unjis*. They occurred at this place as a result of late restoration. Their initial location was different – they are chancel relief bricks and originally were related to the altar's space. Though later consideration was the same, as it was related to the exterior wall of the sacral space.

Thus, the figure of *pask'unji* reflected in Medieval Georgian architectural reliefs typologically and symbolically reveals one complete character. It represents a classical type of *pask'unji*: having a lion's body, lion's clutches, with a head of an eagle and wings, that makes it different from the fantastic creature of Asiatic type, which in spite of a lion's body is represented with claws – attributes of a bird of prey. For the *pask'unji* depicted on the Georgian reliefs are common several signs, which have a general rule: it is related to the most important sacral and symbolic places of the church: dome, entrance, window frame, altar wall, chancel (Nastoljnaya 1983, 18; Tumanishvili 2001, 57–73; Gedevanishvili 2012, 156–199). The location of the *pas'kunji* on the upper parts of the ecclesiastical architecture reflects the dividing of the world on four spheres (paradise, earth, sea, hell), widely spread already since Early Byzantine period. Its upper location directly corresponds to the sacral sphere of the world. (Khelu 1985, 47–64). Their depiction in pairs became typical, with symmetric principles – figures of *pask'unjis* are facing one another, which also, according to Early Christian symbolism, corresponds to the sphere of paradise. This significance is continued by their attributes, namely, by Zoroastrian elements penetrated in Georgian culture from the Iranian: a ribbon tied on their neck (Chubinashvili 1940, 167), a hanger in their beak and plant-ornamented tails.<sup>18</sup> These signs of the royal glory and divinity (Compareti 2006, 191) already occur in Early Christian Georgian culture (Bolnisi, Tsilkani) and are widely spread during V–VI centuries, when the state of Kartli had more intensive political and cultural relations with Sasanian Iran. These attributes are synthetically connected with other Christian symbolic features of the Georgian monuments, and together with additional ancient oriental metaphoric items could be clarified according to the Christian significance of sacrality.<sup>19</sup> Their representation

<sup>18</sup> Similar plant-ornamented tails occur on XI–XII cc mosaics (in Ravenna, San Giovanni Evangelista, cathedral of Bitonto (1200 year), in Mantova, Abazzia, San Benedetto (1007 year). They are also met on ivory plates.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that the Middle Persian designation of this fantastic being is symbolically related to the supernatural sphere, of prophecy and wisdom. Thus, according to the recent studies, the following etymology is suggested: *\*pasku* (n) č from either Old Iranian *\*sku*(n) – “to be wise, prophetic, supernatural, having magic power”, or from Old Iranian *\*skap* “to be wonderful, extraordinary, astonishing” with the preverbal *\*pa-* (< *\*pati-*, *\*apa-* or *\*upa-*) (Buyaner

on the Georgian Medieval relief also appears in the considered period, when political, cultural and religious relations become active with Byzantine Empire. Accordingly, the symbol of *pask'unji*, which was very common in Ancient Georgia, having the earliest and closest contacts with the Orient (Iran, Syria), was incorporated anew through culture. However, its attributes reflect ancient traditions, as the divine ribbon originated in Zoroastrian culture was spread in the Caucasus, namely in Armenia (Compareti 2009, 31), also having close and multifarious relations with Iran, and does not occur on Russian and European griffins' representations<sup>20</sup> (Vagner 1962, 71). This particularity also concerns other zoomorphic beings (like lions of Bolnisi, peacocks of Parkhali and so on). Obviously, the most ancient traditions of Georgian-Iranian interrelations were adopted on the national basis, already in pre-Christian times, and later in the Medieval Georgian art were transformed in symbolic expressions of the Christian idea, preserving their sacral essence. This is mostly asserted by Georgian Medieval written sources, such as "The Conversion of Kartli" (Okropiridze 2011, 7) and XII c Georgian hymnography – "Chants of Svetitskhoveli" by catholicon N. Gulaberisdze (Sulava 2003, 63), where symbolically "claw" and "having a claw" were considered as attributes of the sacral sphere.

For research theme related to *pask'unji* specimen of decorative and applied art, particularly textiles are also rather significant. It is well known that they presented a major part of the import. Precious silk clothes, which were essential part of diplomatic gifts at the Byzantine Emperor's Court, in the processes of cultural influences obtained major importance. Fragments of textiles discovered in Georgia are of different provenance (local, Persian, Antioch, and Constantinople), though they have one general sign – all of them have zoomorphic symbolic forms coming from the Ancient Orient and Sasanian Iran. Among them we see the figures of *pas'kunji*. Fragments of silk textiles preserved in Svaneti churches often served for covering back of Pre-Altar crosses and icons. These functions have XI–XII cc textile fragments from churches of Chazhashi (Keckhoveli 1988, chart III) and Svipi-pari (Keckhoveli 1988, chart IV) villages. There we find figures of *pask'unjis* included in plant symbolic. First of them is of local production, while the other comes from Persia. Though in both cases, the same type of *pask'unji* is depicted, which closely resembles the figures presented on the Georgian reliefs.

Covering of back of Pre-Altar crosses and icons with silk textiles makes it clear that in Georgia (as well as in Byzantine) precious clothes were not only es-

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2005, 28).

<sup>20</sup> A relief tile of Early Byzantine times from Cividale, also a pair of griffins depicted near fountain on the San Mark cathedral relief in Venice; Griffins' representations on the Medieval cathedrals in Bitonto and Otranto. In Russian art griffins are met on façade reliefs of Vladimir and Suzdal architectural monuments as well as on minor artifacts.

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sential part of fashion, but also have diverse functions in liturgical space. Probably such a use of textile could explain images of *pask'unjts* painted in the circle, on the back of Michael Arch Angel's icon (XI c) (Saqvarelidze, Alibegashvili 1980, ill. 8), also painted wall at the refectory in Bertubani monastery (Keckhoveli 1988, ill.4), showing influences of precious textile's decoration style.

Thus, reflection of *pask'unjts* in Medieval Georgian culture is not only of a specific field or contextual, it is distinguished by the functional diversity.

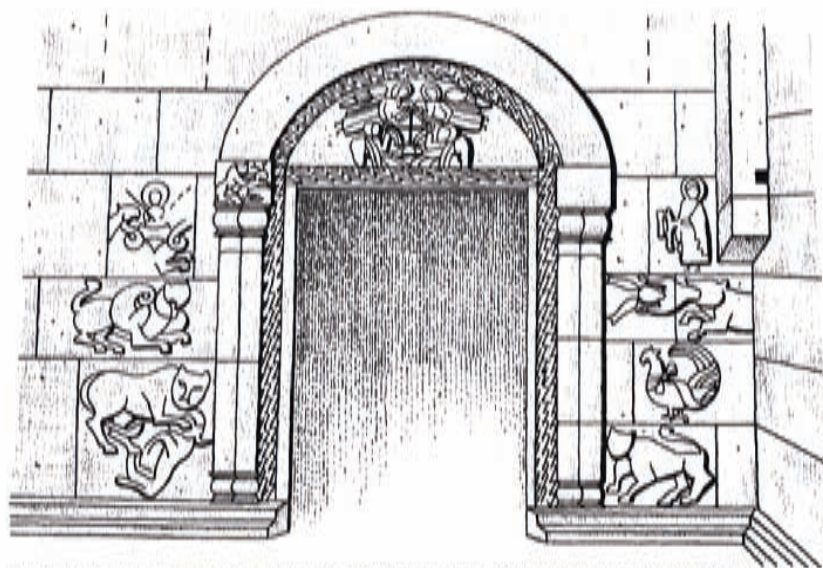
Their general image, attributes and location relate them to the sacral sphere, excluding dualistic consideration, which is characteristic to prey type zoomorphic creatures. In Early Christian period attributes originated from Zoroastrian Iran and related to Sasanian culture, were creatively adopted in the Georgian culture and integrated in synthetic unity of Christian doctrine.

### Illustrations



1. Khakhuli. A *pask'unji*. South Portico. Second half of Xth century.

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2. Khakhuli, *The Ascension of Alexander the Macedonian*, South Portico, second half of the Xth century



3. Oshki, *the frieze of the dome*, A pask'unji, 963-973 years.



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4. Oshki. A couple of pask'unjls. Western window's frame, 963-973 years.



5. Martvili. A pask'unji. The frieze of a western facade. Xth century.

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6. The Bagrati cathedral. A composition with pask'unji. A capital of portico. 1003 year.



7. Nikortsminda. A pask'unji. The dome's frieze. 1014 year.

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8. Samtavisi. A pask'unji, 1030 year.



9. Ruisi. A pask'unji, XIII century.

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