

The Georgian Scriptoria of the Black Mountain (Antioch): Illustrations of the Gospel Books

My project, supported by a FaRiG Grant, researched the illuminated Gospel manuscripts from the Georgian scriptoria of the Black Mountain near Antioch (now in Turkey).

The Georgian codices from these Scriptoria of the Black Mountain collectively form the most significant group of Georgian miniature paintings. They not only illustrate the text, but also depict the cultural and political context in which the handwritten book was produced.

The manuscripts discussed in this project are the codices: A-484 (the so-called Alaverdi Gospel), S-962, H-2211 (the Greater Synaxarion), A-845 (Ruisi Gospel), H-2806, H-1791, A-516 and K-76, survived at the National Centre of Manuscripts of Georgia (former K.Kekelidze State Institute of manuscripts of the Academy of Science of Georgia) and Kutaisi N.Berzenishvili Historical-Ethnographical Museum and Iberico I, from Vatican Library. There is historical evidence of the place and time of execution in the colophons of manuscripts.

One can find similarities between these manuscripts and Georgian and Byzantine manuscript illuminations of the XI-XII centuries (manuscripts of the so-called Black Mountain circle: Šuk.760, from State Historical Museum of Moscow, Sinai, Cod.158 from Sinai Mount collection and Gelati Gospel -Q-908 from the National Center of Manuscripts of Georgia). This indicates that these manuscripts reflect the traditions of the Black Mountain artistic school.

The Black Mountain has been a centre of Georgian literary and educational activity since the XI century. Georgian monastic colonization of the Black Mountain was particularly intense in 1030, when many Georgian monks from Tao Klarjeti, South Georgia settled there. They followed and developed the traditions of the Tao-Klarjeti literary school. This period witnessed the bloom of their activity due to Syria's liberation from Arab conquerors and the establishment there of Byzantine rules (969-1084). Georgian monasteries maintained close relations with other Georgian abodes in Palestine, in Byzantium, especially with Mount Athos; monks studied the Christian literature of the Greek, Syrian and Arab world.

Unfortunately, the exact location of most of the historical Georgian Monasteries is now unknown. Sometimes their Greek names indicate the co-existence of Greek and Georgian abodes. According to hagiographical sources and manuscript inscriptions it seems that these monasteries were ruled by Georgian monks in the middle of the 11th century (even for a small tenure).

The eleventh century is regarded as the beginning of the golden age for Georgian manuscript illumination. The manuscripts executed in these Georgian scriptoria reveal the movement of artistic tendencies towards the so-called Byzantine style.

The cooperation of Georgian painters with Byzantine masters had a marked influence on the eleventh century manuscripts. This influence is seen in the motif of lines of the circular ornamentation, the rich material and the techniques of the painting. These are characteristics associated with the Byzantine style. It should be noted that Georgian masters were never blind followers of Byzantine originals. They always stamped their work with distinctive national features.

We also took into account non-illuminated Georgian manuscripts from the Black Mountain (P-3 - 1040, S-384 – XI-XII cc, A-135 – 1035, J-156 – 1040, I-84 – 1042-1044, I-45 – 1050, J-75 – 1066, Q-37-I-II – 1080-91, H-2211 – 1042-1065, J-2 – XI c and others) in general.

Alongside the Constantinopolitan artistic traditions of the Gospel-Books may be observed “local” Georgian artistic trends.

The result of such creative work is emphasized in the manuscript H-2211, the Greater Synaxarion. According to the colophons and marginal notes, this manuscript was copied and illustrates the monastery of "the Holy Cross" of the Black mountain. It was commissioned by David Djibisdze, and produced by Ioanne Djibisdze. They were monks from the Shatberdi (South Georgia) monastery.

After 1035 they moved to the Black Mountain and founded the new Georgian monastery of the "Holy Cross."

The adoration of the Greater Synaxarion (H-2211) is limited by rectangular headpieces, initials and tailpieces. The stylistic character points to the sense of line and linear perception

The main decorative details of the Gospel illustration are the framing of Eusebius' Letter to Carpianus, the Canon Tables, the Leaved Cross, and the Evangelists at the beginning of each gospel.

The Canon Table system reveals the Black Mountain's particular approach to decoration: paired, double tiered columns carrying a rectangular entablature with censers hanging in the corners of architrave are innovations of the Georgian Manuscripts.

This investigation leads to specific conclusions about the Black Mountain artistic school, which show different methods from Georgian Gospel illustrations.

The number of the Canon Tables (14), the particular choice of the framed two-paged Letter of Eusebius to Carpianus, the depiction of Crosses, the Evangelists' portraits, and the Illustrations of Abgar's story all reflect an unusual approach of scribes and illustrators from the Black Mountain School as well as the commissioner's wishes.

Canon Tables inserted in various other manuscripts serve as a close analogy: Shuk.760 of 1070, from Moscow State Historical Museum, Tbeti Gospel (N212) from Saint-Petersburg National Library. The Greek manuscripts also provide close parallels: Cod.158 from Sinai Mount, M.70 from Princeton Scheide Library, Cod .57, from Athens National Library, Theol. gr.154 from National Library of Vienna, Palat.5 and others.

Traditionally, the portraits of the Evangelists are placed on the opening of each Gospel in the manuscripts under discussion. Two different iconographic versions occur: 1. seated Evangelists on golden and architectural backgrounds; 2. St. John dictating to Prochorus

Next to the traditional elements, Alaverdi Gospel includes the text of the correspondence between King Abgar and Christ, "Epistle of King Abgar, written to Our Lord, Jesus Christ" - illustrated in five miniatures.

The aim of the study was to survey the principle characteristics of the illuminations of the manuscripts in the framework of one artistic school; establishing the typical artistic features and iconographic program of separate schools of miniature painting helped us to reconstruct the process of evolution of Georgian Book Illumination.

We have outlined the artistic principles of manuscript illustrations in the traditions of the Black Mountain school and underlined the details of the work, which were common for the book art of the period, demonstrating the study of innovations, traditions and relations not only with artistic samples from other monasteries of the Black Mountain, but also the relevance of the schools of Constantinople, Mount Athos, Sinai Mount, itself Georgian, and Greek, Syrian and Armenian manuscripts.

Only some of the monuments of the Black Mountain manuscripts of the 11th century have survived until today, but we can still discuss the achievements of this artistic school in the development of manuscript decoration. Characteristic iconographic and stylistic quests prove that as well as being a literary centre, a strong artistic school existed at the Black Mountain Georgian Scriptorium in the XI century. Our investigation leads to specific conclusions about this artistic centre, which show different methods from Georgian Gospel illustrations.

Conclusion

A significant group of manuscripts survived from the Georgian Monasteries of Antioch, revived from the 1030s. Particular attention is drawn to the illuminated and illustrated manuscripts. The codices copied and illustrated at the Georgian scriptoria of this region form the outstanding group of Georgian miniatures.

This area was re-conquered by Byzantium from Arabs (969-1084) and monastic life was reanimated. Nevertheless, many Georgian monks and clergy moved from Tao-Klarjeti to Antioch and alongside literary activities, they supported the spreading of Tao-Klarjetian artistic traditions. For that

time the program of manuscript illumination based both on Tao-Klarjetian traditions and, especially, on Antiochene artistic thought was gradually established.

One of the first manuscripts (H-2211 – The Great Synaxsarion -1042) reflects primarily Tao-Klarjetian peculiarities, while the manuscript-gospels of the following years reflect the synthesis of both artistic features (A-484 the so-called Alaverdi Gospel - 1054, S-962 - 1054, K-76 - 1060, AA-845 – II half of the 11th century, Iberico I –middle of the 11th century,HH-2806-XII century,AA-516 – XII century, H-1791 –XIII century). Executed at the different, but closely connected, monastic centres of Antioch these codices show those peculiarities and as such we call them “Antiochene Manuscripts.” The interaction of these artistic traditions is displayed in the architectonics and iconography of the Canon tables, and in their distinctive (14) quantity (that is manifested only in Georgian “Antiochene” manuscripts and also in Georgian (IIIк.760 -1070) and Byzantine (Sinai, Cod.158) codices plausibly created under their influence). The sequence of the Canon Table system and the Leaved Cross echoes local symbolic thought. The portraits of the Evangelists are common only to this school. The Alaverdian version of Abgar’s story is completely connected to the Antiochene traditions its insertion into the Georgian manuscript, alongside the other features, should be considered as a sign of respect to this tradition.

The project attempted to discuss the main trends of the Antiochene artistic school and its relations with Byzantine and Syriac manuscripts. It also indicates the influences of intercultural interaction on Georgian book art.