

Roman-Byzantine Eagles in the Georgian Context from the Early Antiquity to the Medieval and Modern Periods

Avaliani Eka*

International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia

*Corresponding Author: Avaliani Eka, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia

ABSTRACT

Recently, more than ever, the role of monuments has been imperative for scholars to shape national identity both for nationalism and memory studies. However, since the state has an influence on the society's cultural memory, it simultaneously controls perceptions formed around icons and/or symbols, as well as their display as the embodiment of the national virtue. Once emerged, created, appropriated, or borrowed, national symbols and their perception take on a life of their own.

The article focuses on iconic symbols of "Eagles" in the Georgian context from the early Antiquity to the Medieval and Modern periods. It explores the implication of the symbol and its functions to establish meaning in the society. The paper explains the process of interaction among meaning, style, content, and receivers, as well as provides a framework to understand how historical memory can serve as a constitutive, relational, and purposive content for collective and state identities.

Acknowledging that heritage is a highly political process, susceptible to the needs of power, the research draws on a number of examples to underline that the symbols of the past portrayed in various media legitimate political symbolism in fact represent political standpoint.

Keywords: eagle, memory, national identity, imperial symbols, symbols of power

INTRODUCTION: A PROBLEM STATEMENT

The implications of material past on personal, local and national cultural identity have been foregrounded by the constructions of cultural politics. Widely accepted as a selective use of the past for contemporary purposes (Ashworth and Graham, 2005, p.7), cultural heritage can be seen as an aggregation of ideas, symbols, emblems and inheritances determined and defined by the needs of societies at the given time. A frequent focus on the relationship between past and present, identity is thus a vital issue in any cultural politics (Hodder, et al., 2017, p. 238).

Visual images, as iconic messages, are best understood by engaging primarily with the literature addressing semiotics, the study of signs (Sebeok, 1991). Semiotics is an investigation of creating and communicating the meaning. An iconic message is essentially supported by iconography, whereas hermeneutic circle encapsulates the act of understanding or interpretation of these symbols. On the other hand, understanding is always historically located within a tradition credited with authority, construed by a recipient. (Hodder, et al., 2017, p.238). Iconic symbols act as a shorthand, conveying and condensing

complicated values or sentiments (Turner, 1967). Inherent to visual symbols is the context in which they are placed and the environment by which they are affected (McDowell, 2008, p. 39). It is, therefore, important to consider the 'wide range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used' (Rose, 2001, p.17). As such, 'visual icons are paramount to our understanding of relationships within local communities and their subsequent relationships with the state' (McDowell, 2008, p. 39). Forester and Johnson (2002, p.525) believe that by contesting, supporting, ratifying or ignoring symbols, political elites and communities engage with one another in a 'symbolic dialogue'.

The author of this article considers that in a wide range of political and cultural landscape, the 'symbolic dialogue' may take place between local elites and the agents of foreign powers. From that moment on, the symbol gains global meaning and understanding.

Taking an innovative approach to study a symbol of an eagle in the Georgian context, we will examine: 1) why this distinct symbol was adopted from the antiquity, how the meaning of

the image was created and later, had paramount importance on the Medieval and Modern iconography, and 2) how iconic meaning was communicated between artistic and ideological modes in the last two millennia. Using a variety of sources from various periods, we trace the process through which the symbol of eagle has been appropriated, rejected, and reinterpreted in the Georgian context.

IMAGES OF EAGLES IN ANTIQUITY, GEORGIAN CONTEXT

An image of an eagle, as an iconic symbol, reappears during many centuries in the cultural environment of Georgia. Visual images become noticeable in both Western and Eastern Georgia since the fifth century BC till the Late Antiquity. Eagles are represented in various compositional scenes. The objects are of different origins and mainly imported from foreign workshops of the Mediterranean and the Near Eastern countries.

The Golden appliqué with winged eagle from the grave N11 (GNM: 10-975:71. Vani, Western Georgia) dates back to 460-430 BC (The Fitzwilliam Museum, *the Land of Golden Fleece*). Apparently, the clothing appliqué were attached to the garment of a deceased person. Slightly different shapes of golden eagles (GNM: 1-2005:29. Vani, Western Georgia) found in the tomb N 24 are dated back to a period of 350-300 BC (The Fitzwilliam Museum, *the Land of Golden Fleece*). The signet ring with an image of an eagle was placed near there mains of a deceased person in the same grave.

The image of an eagle, protector of the elites and military aristocracy was deeply entrenched in the Greek and Persian iconography. Eagles from Vani are associated with the Achaemenid-Colchian or Greco-Colchian styles. Another figure of a winged eagle reappears in Vani (Western Georgia) in the late II century BC and (Shoshitashvili, 2011) has distinguishing characteristics of the Roman imperial eagle.

The earliest samples of the Greek defensive arms found on the territory of Colchis represent a bronze plate with an image of an eagle from the grave at the Krasnij Mayak necropolis in Abkhazia (dated back to the first half of the 5th century BC)(Kvirkvelia, 2000,p. 233).An eagle is depicted in flight with its head to the left, the open wings and a tail.It is believed that the item originates from the workshops of one of the Ionian centres of the Northern Black Sea littoral (Kvirkvelia, 2000, p. 233).

An eagle holding a snake in the beak is represented on the intaglio ring from Dablagomi, Western Georgia. The intaglio is decorated with the crescent and an olive-branch symbols (Javakhishvili, 2015, p.8).The inventory of the tomb from Sairkhe was remarkable with a lot of luxury objects, among them some golden appliqué of 33 eagles were found in the same grave (Makharadze & Saginashvili, 1999, p.11).

A bronze statue of a stag has been found in the palace of the Roman commander-in-chief, located on the territory of the Roman garrison in Gonio. The sculpture of an eagle is placed between the horns of a stag(I-III cc) (Mamuladze et al., 2017, pp.7,16).A sword with an eagle image is found in a funerary context (the grave N3), in Kldeti, Western Georgia.The sword was embellished with a silver buckle, decorated with a semi-precious gemstone. The powerful eagle was depicted on a large intaglio, mounted on a plinth holding a crown in its beak (Lomtadze, 1957, pp.131-133, Fig 27; Todua, 2006, p.12). To the right of the eagle, a relatively small image of the goddess Nike is depicted, while on the left side, the sign of the Roman legion is portrayed.The eagle, as a symbol of the Roman Empire, coincided with an official iconography and pointed to the high imperial authority of its owner. This sword most likely belonged to an elite warrior or a military commander (Lomtadze, 1957, p.131).

Some Italic gem-engravers preserved in the Georgian State Museum (dated by I-III centuries) represent an eagle in different scenes, the winged eagle holding a snake in its talons(inv. 892 D.) (Lortkipanidze, 1967, pp.72-73), and the eagle holding the wheat in its talons (inv. 869. D.) (Lortkipanidze, 1967, p.60).

Influenced by Roman iconography, the gems with an image of an eagle was perceived as the luxurious pieces of jewelry in the Kingdom of Iberia (Bibiluri, 2019, p.73). The icon of an eagle appears in different contexts, e.g. a bronze eagle surrounded by Greco-Roman gods was found in the palace ruins near *Dedoplist Gora* (Queen's Hill) (Gagoshidze, 2015, p.124), a gilded silver bowl was excavated in the cemetery of Aragvispiri village (the grave N10).On the bottom of the bowl a winged eagle holding a crown in its beak (Ramishvili, 1975, p.12) is depicted.The bowl dates back to the late Roman period (III-IV centuries).Another image of an eagle comes from the ancient settlement of Mdzoreti (Modern Kareli district) and dates

back to the late Antiquity. In this scene, the eagle clutches a rabbit in its talons (Gamqrelidze et al., 2013, p.739).

In the pagan religion of western Georgia, specifically in Samegrelo, the cult of an eagle appears in legends and folktales. On the site of the present Martvili Church, there used to be a big oak tree (*Didi chkoni - chkondidi*). The figure of a man made of cast-iron (or of copper) was attracted nearby. This idol was called *Kapunia/Rokapunia*, or *Didgimiri/Dodgimiri*. People believed it to be an eagle-man, who had its nest in Chkondidi (Mashurko, 1894, pp.376-377; Ghambashidze, 2017, p.21; Eliava, 1962, p. 15).

Exploring iconography and symbolic meaning widely spread in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures, one can consider that an eagle was a symbol of power, patronage, and superiority, as well as the emblem of military and state institutions. Based on the aforementioned archaeological data and historical sources, it can be assumed that the image of an eagle appears on the territory of Georgia from the Ancient times. While studying visual images and the context, one may conclude that these iconic messages define ideological, social and aesthetic aspects of ancient Georgian elite society and can be perceived as an expression of “outward projection” of imperial images.

BYZANTINE SYMBOLS OF POWER IN PERIPHERY

After a complete religious metropolitanization of the Byzantine Empire (in the Middle Byzantine period), Constantinople had abundant resources to disperse and thus establish new neighboring state satellites in the southwest districts of Tao/Tayk', Klarjet'i/Klarjk', and Shavshet'i/Shawshēt'. Soon after reinforcing religious interconnection with Constantinople, the Empire fostered another type of dependency — a political one. This was entirely consistent with the imperial principles of recognition of Christian statehood by the “Byzantinizing” Georgian Bagratids in southwest districts of Tao/Tayk', Klarjet'i/Klarjk', and Shavshet'i/Shawshēt'.

Georgian Bagratids were the most important princely dynasty of Caucasia, maintaining the royal status from the ninth till the nineteenth century in Georgia. Bagrationi of Tao-Klarjeti founded the “Kingdom of Georgians” (Kartvelta Samepo) in the ninth century in the southwest of

Georgia. Historically, the Bagratids appear in 314 reigning in Sper, modern Ispiri, which was then a part of the Georgian principality of Tao-Klarjeti (ca. 6,000 km²) with the great castle of Bayberd (modern Bayburt) in the valley of the C'oruh, in northwestern Armenia (Toumanoff, Bagratids). The Kingdom of Georgians covered the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kola-Artaani, Shavsheti, Tao-Klarjeti, Basiani, Speri and Tortomi (Tortumi). Starting from the 6th century, Grand Dukes of Kartli and subsequently, the kings of the Georgians were bestowed with honorable titles of *Magistros*, *Hypatos*, *Patrikos*, *Curopolates*, *Nobelissimus*, and *Caesar* (e.g. Ashot I, Bagrat I, David I, Adarnase IV, David III, Bagrat III, Bagrat IV etc.). Conferring titles upon Georgian kings was the prerogative of the Byzantine emperors (Avaliani, 2019).

The Byzantine imperial model, with its vital religious and cultural appurtenances — by means of style, patterns, standards, and symbols — laid the foundation to the recreation of the Georgian “nation-state” with the early forms of “Christian Orthodox Nationalism.” Georgian “Christian Orthodox Nationalism” rose from the womb of the Empire and adopted Byzantine traditions, doctrines, and symbols of power. Creation of a new state model first needed political attestation, and afterwards, the affirmation of the legitimacy of power via Constantinople. Subsequently, the “transmitted power” through the symbolic and iconic images was submitted to Bagratids of Tao. Byzantine symbolism (in the Middle Byzantine period 843–1204) resembled on the one hand Roman imperial images, but on the other hand, resynthesized them into completely new forms and iconic images. Autopoiesis in Byzantine art (the motion of self-creation and the self-representation) embodied religious and political perceptions of the superiority. The embodied symbols of Christian political power were handed over to those political entities and states, which were considered in the area of the “imperial affiliation”. The self-visualization and auto reference of imperium can be analyzed through the transformation of the symbol of an eagle.

A single headed Roman imperial eagle was continuously used in Byzantium, (e.g. Early Byzantine eagle, north of the Golden Gate in Constantinople 412–414, 6th century Byzantine Roman mosaic of an eagle catching a snake, from the peristyle of the Great Palace from the reign of Emperor Justinian I, the key stone has

an open-winged, single-headed eagle looking towards East, from Hagia Sophia Church in Trabzon etc.) (Avaliani, 2019, p.156).

In the early and late Middle Ages, the symbols, such as an eagle attacking a snake with its beak (Wittkower, 1939), as well as an eagle with a small mammal, or bird in its claws (or eagle standing frontally with its wings outspread) became common themes for the Byzantine visual art (Maguire, 1992, p.286). The combination of a cross and an eagle on an imperial royal scepter existed as early as in the sixth century. Eagle-topped scepters were a frequent feature of consular diptychs, and appear on coins until the reign of Philippikos Bardanes (r. 711–713) (Cutler, 1991, p.669).

Bagrationi of Tao-Klarjeti founded Oshki and Khakhuli Monasteries in the historical Tao province. Oshki was built between 963 and 973. The monastery is located in Turkey, in the village of Çamlıyamaç, in northeastern Erzurum Province, bordering Artvin Province. Khakhuli Monastery was founded in the second half of the 10th century by King David III Kurapalates. Oshki's eagle is depicted with a mammal (though sometimes perceived as a calf, a lamb or a sheep) in its talons. Khakhuli's eagle is depicted with half-open wings, holding a deer in its claws (Беридзе, 1981, p. 292, pls. 59-61, 118; Djobadze, 1986, pp.81-100).

The date of the first introduction of a double-headed eagle in the Byzantine Empire has been much discussed. It was certainly employed by members of the Palaiologan dynasty, perhaps to show that the empire looked both towards the West and the East (The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, 1991, p.669). This symbol was not appropriated by Georgian Bagratids, while in Russia, a double-headed eagle appeared from the time of Grand Prince Ivan III in 1497, when Ivan married a Byzantine princess, Sophia Palaiologina.

The political formation of the Georgian statehood, including its governing institutions, royal titles, and symbols of power can be perceived as an expression of a direct “export” of imperial images and institutions.

Understanding a symbol of national identity can help us to better understand national orientations and political actions. Referring to Georgian kings in a Byzantine manner, allocation of Byzantine symbols of power, readiness to reconstitute Georgian politics as a new united

political model responding to imperial challenges, and acceleration of interdependence on the imperial metropolis proves Georgia's affiliation with a Byzantine empire.

THE EXTENSION OF MEMORY: EAGLES, SYMBOL OF IDENTITY AND POWER DURING THE REIGN OF EREKLE II

An eagle as a symbol of power reappears during the reign of Erekle II, the Georgian monarch of the Bagrationi dynasty (the King of Kartli and Kakheti from 1762 until 1798). Erekle II placed his kingdom under the formal Russian protection. As a result of the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783, the Georgian King finally obtained the guarantees he had sought from Russia, transforming Georgia into a Russian protectorate. Erekle II formally repudiated all legal ties to Persia and placed his foreign policy under the Russian imperial control. Political relationships with Russian Empire replicated on the Georgian royal iconography, in 1781, 1787, 1789 years with a double-headed eagle appearing on royal copper coins. During the 1780s, Erekle II's name was placed in full in Asomtavruli: ႱႱႱႱႱႱႱ (IRAKLI) and the image used was a double-headed eagle (Paghava, 2017, p.253). The double-headed eagle, on the one hand, indicated the bonds with the Byzantine, and, on the other hand, demonstrated ties with the Russian Empire. The appropriation of the symbol of Byzantine Empire between two historical actors, the Russians and the Georgians, claiming their inheritance, visibly demonstrates how and why they esteemed and valued legacies of the Christian Empire and how they were able to claim the inheritance to which they were entitled to.

However, during the Russo-Turkish War (1787–1792), a Tbilisi-based small Russian force evacuated from Georgia, leaving Erekle II alone to face new threats from Persia. In 1795, Agha Mohammad Khan demanded Erekle II to acknowledge Persian suzerainty. However, the Georgian King refused, and in September 1795, the Persian army of 35,000 moved into Georgia. After a valiant defense of Tbilisi at the Battle of Krtsanisi, Erekle's small army was completely defeated. Tbilisi was sacked. Despite being betrayed by the Russian empress, the Georgian King still relied on a belated Russian support. In 1796, Empress Catherine II directed the Russian expeditionary forces into the Persian territories, but her successor Paul I again withdrew all Russian troops from the region. Mohammad

Khan launched his second campaign to punish Georgians for their alliance with Russia.

Since 1796, the images of a double-headed eagle disappeared from the Georgian coins. The images of a double-headed eagle were replaced with a single-headed Roman-Byzantine imperial eagle. Since 1796 we have copper coins of Erekle II with the effigy of an eagle produced at Tbilisi mint. The King also produced gold coins with the effigy of an eagle, two samples of which are maintained in Hermitage, Saint-Petersburg (Online English-Georgian Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics, *Copper Coins of Erekle II with the Effigy of Eagle*). According to Yevgeniy Pakhomov's (Пахомов, 1970), the change of the imagery, specifically the reduction of the number of the eagle-heads, was inspired by the alteration of the weight standard and the desire to make new coins easily distinguishable from the previous batch. However, the author of this paper presumes that change and alteration of the symbols exclusively coincide with the political views of the Georgian King and reflect his sharp disagreements regarding Russian imperial policy. The single-headed image of an eagle contains Roman-Byzantine elements, which shows a spiritual and direct succession to the Byzantine Empire.

CONCLUSION

Political elites reinvent signs and symbols and impose them in different contexts, adapting their reference and meaning accordingly to the political and cultural circumstances. As such, they articulate heritage, and symbols can be perceived as the icons of the national identity. On August 10, 2000 Georgian bi-metallic 10-Lari coin were put into circulation to commemorate the 3,000th anniversary of the Georgian statehood. The coin depicts features bas-reliefs of an eagle and a lion from the 11th century Svetitskhoveli cathedral (denoting the strength of the state). The composition is finalized by a leaf ornament and seven stars. The coin is circled with a legend that reads, in Georgian, "3,000th anniversary of Georgian statehood" (National Bank of Georgia, *Coins*).

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