

**For some artistic images of the Virgin Mary in Georgian Hymnography  
(Heaven, Vine, Rose, Dove)**

**Abstract:** The Virgin Mary occupies a major place in ecclesiastic poetry. In the hymnography images and symbols denoting Virgin Mary and used to glorify and laud queens are particularly noteworthy. The use of these images points to the ideology and philosophy of the authors. Every symbolic image has Biblical-Evangelistic and patristic foundations. Features of these artistic images served to clearly outline Virgin Mary's eternal nature, Her nobility, and God-given chastity, which continues to give the humankind the sense of eternal mystery.

**Key words:** The Virgin, Georgian Hymnographers, Heaven, Vine, Rose, Dove

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Over centuries, rich hymnography and examples of homiletic monuments created an individual world of images and symbols.

The Virgin Mary occupies a major place in ecclesiastic poetry. The idea of Georgia's being allotted to Virgin Mary that the Georgian spirit has become closely linked with and that has become part of the nation's genetic code was of course reflected in Georgian literature.

In the hymnography images and symbols denoting Virgin Mary and used to glorify and laud queens are particularly noteworthy. The use of these images points to the ideology and philosophy of the authors. Every symbolic image has Biblical-Evangelistic and patristic foundations.

A hymnographer can choose an allegoric symbol, artistic device, association, and parallelism of images on the basis of any hypodigmatic or paradigmatic content in order to communicate his feelings and emotions to listeners. However, a big amount of information can be seen behind these symbols and it needs creators and perceivers with liturgical perception. It is impossible to perceive images and symbols of the Virgin Mary without taking into account the events unfolding in the Old Testament, because the Old Testament anticipated Christ and comprised allegoric symbols that pointed to the New Testament. It was the pre-image of events and personalities in the new era.

In this work, we considered some artistic images used as epithets of the Virgin Mary in Georgian hymnography.

There are some faces which are able to hold Our Lord only symbolically, as otherwise, nothing can hold Him, since it is He, who encompasses everything. This is confirmed by Ephraim the Small: "It is sometimes said that God is in the heaven, sometimes in the church, and sometimes in the Virgin, but it is evident that none of the places can hold Him, as He alone encompasses all these" (Explanations 1996: 83).

**Heaven:** The heaven is the universal symbol of the boundlessness of the distance visible to humans. It was regarded as the habitat of heavenly creatures in most ethnic cultures. The same is true of the Bible (Psalms, 19, 4; Matthew, 5, 34; Genesis, 49, 25; Exodus, 16, 21). It is natural that the heaven symbolizes everything divine, inaccessible, and endless. The heaven was often mentioned as a metaphoric name of Lord (Ilia Chavchavadze's poetic expression - "The heaven sends me and the nation raises me, the earthly one raises the heavenly one" - the "heaven" is a metaphor of God). This image was not alien to hymnographers either. They used it to convey the supremacy and greatness of the Virgin.

Since the heaven is the habitat of God, it is natural that Virgin Mary is implied in it, as Her bosom held the supreme creator of the universe: "Slave Mary and Virgin Mother, the heaven of heavens, the only One, the bridge for God coming to men" (Ancient 1980: 439); "Virgin Mary, glorious heaven of God" (Ancient 1980: 461). The Virgin elevated among humans and prominent among virgins is viewed not only in heaven, but also in "supreme heaven": "You are the

most blessed among mothers, You, the Virgin in supreme heaven" (Modrekili 1978: 388). "Supreme heaven" is often replaced by "broadest heaven": "Mary, the holiest among the holy, Mother of God in broadest heaven" (Neumatic 1982: 847).

Thus, along with other symbols, heaven is the habitat of God in spiritual poetry. Therefore, it also points to Virgin Mary. The Son of God encompasses everything and Virgin Mary can hold everything. This is the unspoken secret of Virgin Mary.

The metaphorical system of plants and birds attaches peculiar overtones to the image of Virgin Mary. It enables to better convey the features of Virgin Mary and go deep into Her pure spiritual world. Ecclesiastic literature that is based on the Bible has used names of plants and birds in the metaphorical systems, making them organic parts of themes. In this work, we discuss the following images: vine, rose and dove. Observation of the genesis of these images again led us to the Bible, in particular to the Old Testament, and we were able to see what road the symbols travelled from the Old Testament to hymnography.

**Vine:** Vine was the first plant (effectively an incarnation of the tree of life) that Noah planted after the Deluge and the book of Exodus presents the first sign of the plant, when Israelis reach the Promised Land after their departure from Egypt. Vine was also regarded as a symbol of nature, abundance, power, and beauty. "For there shall be a sowing of peace, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops" (Zachariah, 8, 12).

Georgians regarded vine as the tree of life. It is known that our ancestors regarded the Sun as an astral deity and vine was a plant incarnating it. Hymnographers particularly praised vine as a symbol of Virgin Mary. They described it as "sensible", as it gave birth to God, it is the habitat of Lord and, therefore, is "royal": "We glorify Virgin Mary, the mother and virgin, the mother of Lord, the sensible vine" (Minchkhi 1987: 160); "We entreat and mention you, Mary, as the royal vine, the supreme city of Lord" (Abashidze 1984: 227).

Vine has a peculiar epithet in *Homily on the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God* by Andrew of Crete: "The vine with a beautiful stalk emerged from Anne and produced a delicious cluster" (Old 1986: 121). The "vine with a beautiful stalk" - Mary - produced a "delicious cluster", i.e. Christ.

Brilliant examples of tropological thinking linked to the symbol of vine became widespread in hymnography: "sensible vine", "vine of truth", "beautiful vine", "vine with a beautiful stalk", "royal vine", "divine vine", "cluster of purity". The Christian religion completed the metaphorical system of vine, which was reflected in spiritual poetry.

**Rose:** According to early Christian traditions, rose had no thorns before the original sin. Roses linked to Virgin Mary have no thorns in Christianity either. In the books of the Old Testament, they were symbols of beauty, joy, eulogy, divinity, wisdom, mystery, pride, and silence. They had the same features in spiritual literature and occupied an important role in Christian art. German artist Albrecht Durer depicted Virgin Mary with a bunch of roses in one of his pictures.

Hymnographers lavishly used the symbol of rose to depict Virgin Mary: "The Saviour selected you like roses and fragrant lilies in mountains and streams and settled in you and was born, filling the whole world with fragrance, Queen" (Kavtaria 1977: 233). In his *Months*, George of Mtatsminda used several flowers as symbols to emphasize Virgin Mary's chastity. The choral mentions purple rose, lily and a flower of streams, which attaches a unique colouring to it: "Our Lord Christ found you as a purple rose, as a lily, and as a flower of streams and incarnated in you, Virgin" (Mtatsminda 2007: 259). In spiritual poetry, roses are used as a metaphor of not only Virgin Mary, but also Christ and saints.

**Dove:** Dove was regarded as a symbol of divine purity and chastity from ancient times. It was regarded as a heavenly messenger between God and man. In the archaic layers of the Bible, we encounter a dove that returned to Noah's Ark with an olive branch in its beak during the Deluge, which meant that the wrath of God had changed to mercy. This Biblical episode became the foundation for the universal symbol of dove, turning the bird chosen by God into a permanent symbol of peace. In the New Testament, the Saviour Himself describes it as a symbol of innocence and purity. He said to his disciples: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew, 10, 16).

Hymnographers often used the symbol of dove as an expression of Virgin Mary: "We should all yearn for the innocent divine dove, chaste virgin, and the blessed among mothers in the supreme heaven, who gave birth to God" (Ingoroqva 1913: 71). The symbol can also be found in Rustaveli's work, in which Nestan-Darejan's mind is compared with dove. According to Nestan Sulava, this context confirms Nestan-Darejan's spiritual purity and perfection, as "being endowed with the mind of dove" can only be the result of consecration with God.

Features of these artistic images served to clearly outline Virgin Mary's eternal nature, Her nobility, and God-given chastity, which continues to give the humankind the sense of eternal mystery.

Hymnographers present no theological novelties, but the variety of expression and the use of various motives create the feeling of participation in the events described in hymns by removing time and spatial limits and promoting the spiritual development of people with liturgical mindset, which is one of the functions of hymnography.

The rich language of Georgian Hymnography played an important role in developing poetic language of Georgian literature, which naturally incorporated the principles of biblical hypo- and paradigmatic structure and means of expression that, in turn, enhanced the artistic vision of Georgian writers and broadened their intellectual thinking.

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