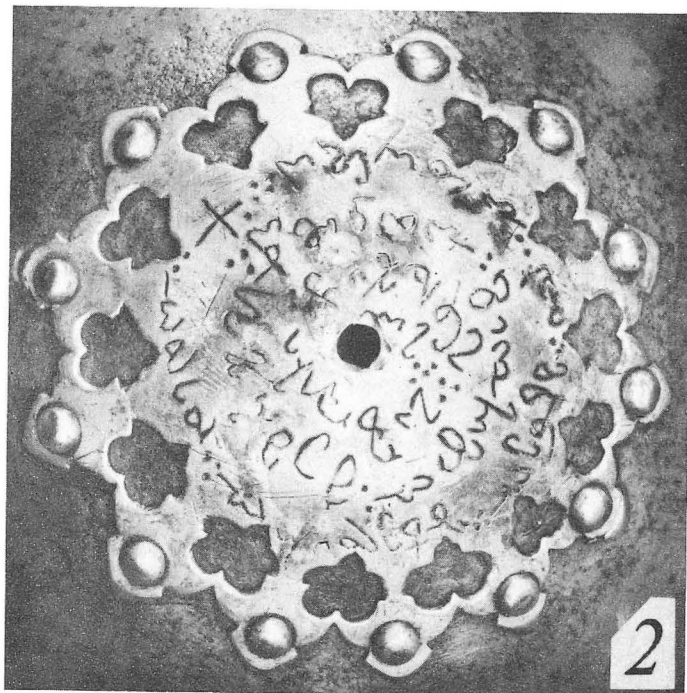






Agnieszka KARBOWSKA

THE GEORGIAN HELMET OF THE WAWEL TREASURY

There is among the Oriental objects of the Wawel treasury a forged steel helmet which has been arising interest of many a scholar for years. It has the shape of half of an ellipsoide (Fig. 1). The lower edge of the helmet has riveted catches for aventail and two cut-outs in the shape of eyebrows with a nasal socket (nasal not preserved) between them. Its decoration is very scarce. It consists of an openwork frieze of rhythmically repeated trefoil pattern - riveted to the lower part of the bowl - and of a silver finial plate with its edges cut in the openwork pattern corresponding to that on the frieze. The plate is covered with an engraved inscription. In its central part, at the apex, there is an opening where, possibly, the tube of a plume was once attached (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1. The Wawel helmet.

Fig. 2. Finial plate of the Wawel helmet.

The Wawel helmet has been repeatedly mentioned in various technical publications. In 1935, its photograph was published in the Persian Art Exhibition Catalogue by Towarzystwo Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych (Society for the Promotion of Arts) and the Polish-Iranian Society in Warsaw. It was described there as follows: "Oriental helmet, thirteenth to fourteenth century, bowl forged from one piece, riveted rim with the socket of missing nasal, aventail catches on the rim, silver finial plate with illegible signs, edges of the rim and the plate cut out in Persian ornaments"¹. Then, in 1939, a famous expert in Persian art, A. U. Pope, in his monumental work entitled A Survey of Persian Art, described the object as: "Helmet, steel, with appliques, seventeenth century"². Another English scholar, H. Russell Robinson, writes about it: "Persian helmet, thirteenth to fourteenth century"³. In 1975, Z. Żygulski Jr. wrote about the Wawel helmet:

... such helmets are not known from the fourteenth-century Persian iconography, just like the helmets with masks and chichaks with movable nasals, cheek and neck guards do not appear in the artistic renderings of that time. Contrary to Robinson's opinion, the helmet certainly does not belong to Persian tradition; its type stems from the Roman Antique, and in the Oriental relation, it probably originated in the Egyptian culture⁴.

In 1975, the same author in an article in the Islamic Arms and Armour magazine, took a different standpoint, describing the helmet as Persian and dating it at the fourteenth century⁵.

The Wawel helmet combines the features common to the relics of a broad range of territories and a long span of time with those peculiar to a specific region. And so, the rivet holes just above the eye cut-outs are the trace of eyebrow imitation plates which are reminiscent of those seen on the late Sassanian helmets pictured on the reliefs in Tāq-i-Būstan near Hamadan, west Iran⁶ (Fig. 3). This element is also found in a completely different

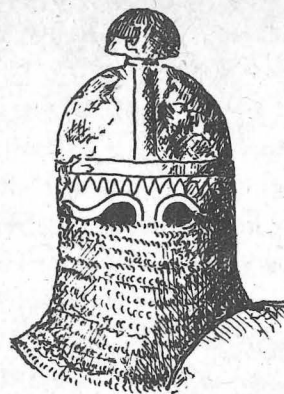


Fig. 3. Sassanian helmet of the Tāq-i-Bustān relief, after H. Russell Robinson, Oriental Armour, London 1967, p. 23.

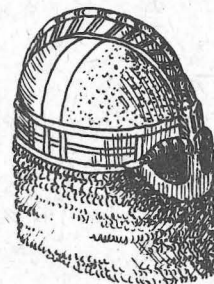


Fig. 4. Swedish helmet, seventh century, after H. Russell Robinson, Oriental Armour, London 1967, p. 23.

culture, i. e. in Scandinavia. Swedish helmets dated at the seventh century could serve as an example⁷ (Fig. 4). Also Turkish chichaks dated at the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century used to have eyebrows, though of a different shape⁸. These facts, however, are not sufficient for establi-

shing any interrelation between the helmets. This anthropomorphic element could be exploited in various cultures in order to enrich the battle helmet with naturalistic, fearsome features.

The Wawel helmet has many affinities with the helmet of the Leningrad Hermitage collection, dated at the fifteenth century, and described as Persian⁹. In both objects, the frieze ornaments encircling the lower part of the bowl are identical. It is moulded in the above-mentioned rhythmically repeated trefoils. The ornament of the Wawel helmet is in its lower part fringed with a list, while in the case of the Leningrad helmet, the list appears both at the top and the bottom of it. Both objects have identically shaped lower parts of the bowl (below the frieze), i. e. the nasal socket and the plates imitating eyebrows. The latter are preserved in the Leningrad helmet, while the rivet holes visible on the Kraków helmet are all that was left after them. The differences between these two helmets lie in the shape of the bowl and the cap. The comparison was made on the basis of the drawing published in Robinson's book. It is not unlikely, however, that the shape of the Leningrad helmet is actually a little different from that pictured. There is reason to believe this since the drawing of the Wawel helmet as rendered in the same source is very inaccurate. On the picture, the proportions of the helmet and the shape of the bowl are changed and the existing aventail catches are disregarded. The shape of the finial plate is rendered sketchily¹⁰ (Fig. 5a, b).

In the Kremlin treasury there is a helmet described as Persian and dated at the mid-sixteenth century. It is made of copper and covered with an engraved harbal ornament. The shape of the bowl is visibly flattened. Both this and the Wawel helmet have identical notches on the finial plate circumference and the same profile of the list enclosing the lower part of the bowl¹¹ (Fig. 6).

The shape of the Wawel helmet is unique, as is that of its Leningrad counterpart. No clear analogies that would permit us to determine the time and place of origin of the object could be found in any reference material. The only elements to be of consequence in this respect are the type of ornamentation and the inscription on the finial plate.

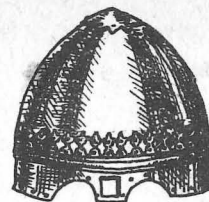


Fig. 5a. The Wawel helmet, after H. Russell Robinson, *Oriental Armour*, London 1967, p. 32.

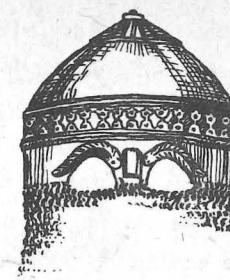


Fig. 5b. The helmet of the Hermitage collection, after H. Russell Robinson, London 1967, p. 32.

The frieze on the lower part of the bowl and the notches on the circumference of the finial plate have an identical motif of stylised trefoils. This decorative element is widely known in the countries of Islam. It occurs in the Caucasian and Persian carpets (frequently in geometrised form)¹²; it also appears on various pieces of Turkish and Persian armour¹³. It occurs particularly frequently in Georgian art, which made use of it both in architecture and in handicraft, and especially in metalwork¹⁴. According to Baltrusaitis, it is the most widely used decorative element in Georgia throughout the tenth to fourteenth centuries¹⁵. Not only the shape of the stylised leaves, but also the shape of the spaces between them, is characteristic for Georgian decorative art¹⁶. The regions where the frequent occurrence of the motif has been determined shared their vicissitudes for several ages. As early as the period of Achaemenian and Sassanian rule, both Georgia and those regions of Asia stayed under the common influence of the Persian empire. Later on, the history of Christian Georgia was closely connected to the Muslim empire. Only the eighteenth century - the acceptance of Russian protectorate - launched Georgia into the orbit of a different civilisation.



Fig. 6. The helmet of the Kremlin treasury, after *Treasures of 16-th to 18-th cent. Persian and Turkish Applied Art*, Moscow 1979, p. 19.

The second element to determine the time and place of the origin of the Wawel helmet is the inscription on the finial plate. It was engraved in a Georgian alphabet of mchedrudi.

Georgian writing is alphabetical; it originated about the fourth century in central Georgia. It derives from the consonantal Syrian alphabet and is completed by the vowel signs of the Greek alphabet. In the course of centuries, three varieties of the alphabet were used:

1. round (mrglowani), occurring from the fifth to the eleventh centuries, used in sacral inscriptions;

2. square (kuchtowani or chucuri), a sacral priest's alphabet, which, from the eleventh century on, began to replace the former. It survived up to the eighteenth century;

3. simultaneously, since the ninth century, the third variety, i. e. the knights' alphabet (mchedruli), was used; it was employed in secular literature. In fact, it was an italicised form of the round alphabet.

The inscription engraved on the plate runs spirally in three scrolls from the outside of the circle towards its centre. The text begins with the sign of cross, which is an abbreviation of *Kriste* (Christ). Groups of signs separated by two or three dots make up words. Due to mechanical damage of the plate, it is impossible to identify all the signs. The first outside circle, which is the best preserved one, comprises words: "*Kriste g'merto da mcneo mxeda.o ded(a)o.*" The letter *g* denotes the Georgian sound of voiced *H*, the voiceless *h* being marked with the letter *X*. The period in the word mxeda.o indicates an illegible letter. Judging by its root, the word means all-seeing or looking. In the translation, this word is provided with a question mark. The suffix *o* suggests the use of vocative.

The translation of the first circle runs as follows: "Christ God and Ruler (All-seeing?), Mother". The second circle comprises the following inscription: "*cmind(a)o Giorgio memrǃ*". The letter *a* in parentheses has been added in translation; the deletion is a typical abbreviation in Georgian. The letter *-ǃ* stands for the sound *j*. This circle can be translated as: "Saint George (vocative), being on the right". In the third scroll, only some isolated letters are discernible¹⁷. In sum, we are dealing with an invocation to Christ, the Holy Virgin, and St. George. The text is typical for the Christian Georgia with its particular worship of St. George.¹⁸

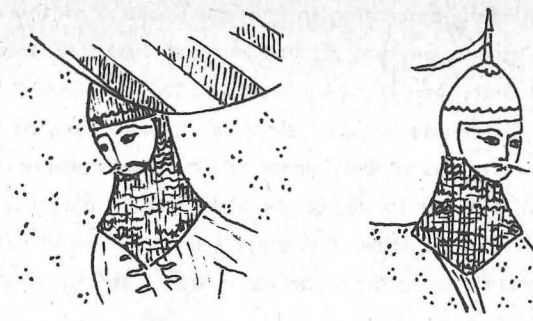


Fig. 7. Two fragments of Georgian miniatures, 17th cent.

Taking into account the ornamentation characteristic for Georgian decorative art and the Georgian inscription, there is no doubt that the object under discussion is of Georgian origin. Seventeenth-century Georgian miniatures of warriors wearing helmets of the shape and ornamentation strikingly similar to that of the Wawel helmet further corroborate this opinion¹⁹ (Fig. 7). Numerous mechanical damages of the bowl, and especially the trace of a blow visible on the finial plate indicate that the helmet was intended for battle. The inscription was not executed with great care, which suggests its provincial provenance, as proposed by D. Marshall Lang²⁰.

The accurate dating of the helmet is, at present, made difficult by the scarcity of reference material. Most probably, the Wawel helmet is the only specimen of this kind in Poland and one of the few in the world, which seems to be indicated by a small number of analogies found in the otherwise numerous publications on Oriental armour. Unfortunately, the alphabet used in the inscription cannot be of any help, since mchedruli has been in continuous use in Georgia starting from the ninth century. All the same, it is possible to speculate on the age of the helmet. Considering the fact that the ornamentation of the helmet is typical for the period of tenth to fourteenth century, we may assume that the helmet dates no later than the fourteenth century. Bearing in mind, though, the probable provincialism of the object on the one hand, and Georgian sentiment for

traditional decorative motifs resulting in the continuation of the same pattern for centuries on the other, we may suggest that perhaps the Wawel helmet was made later than that. In dating the helmet, the previously mentioned miniatures were not taken into account since we cannot exclude the possibility that the artist who pictured the heroes of the poem of the turn of the thirteenth century did not try to depict them in archaic clothes. A more precise dating of the helmet would be possible, if only we could retrace its way to Count Krasieński's collection, from where it was later transferred to the Wawel treasury.

Notes

¹ Persian (Iranian) Art and Its Influence. Exhibition Catalogue, Warsaw 1935, p. 61.

² Arthur Upham Pope, A Survey of Persian Art, London-New York 1939, vol. 3, p. 2566; vol. 6, p. 1414.

³ H. Russell Robinson, Oriental Armour, London 1967, p. 32; Fig. 16A.

⁴ Zdzisław Żygulski Jr., Broń w dawnej Polsce na tle uzbrojenia Europy i Bliskiego Wschodu, Warsaw 1975, p. 130.

⁵ Zdzisław Żygulski Jr., "Islamic Weapons in Polish Collections and their Provenance" [in:] Islamic Arms and Armour, London 1979, pp. 232-233. The author reaffirmed his position in his latest book: Broń wschodnia (Turcja, Persja, Indie, Japonia), KAW 1983, p. 61.

⁶ Robinson, op. cit., p. 23.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 58-59; Fig. 12 C, D.

⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Treasures of 16-th to 18-th Persian and Turkish Applied Art, From the Collections of the State Museums in the Moscow Kremlin. A Catalogue, p. 19.

¹² Tadeusz Wierzejski, Maria Kałamajska-Saeed, Kobierce Wschodnie, Warsaw 1970, pp. 50, 86.

¹³ Robinson, op. cit., pp. 18-19, plate II C; pp. 34-35, plate III C; pp. 58-59, plate X A.

¹⁴ Iskusstvo Kubaci, Leningrad 1976, passim.

¹⁵ Jurgis Baltrusaitis, Etudes sur l'art médiéval en Géorgie et en Arménie, Paris 1929, pp. 24-26.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁷ The present author wishes to thank Professor Jan Braun of the Warsaw University for the deciphering of the inscription.

¹⁸ David Marshall Lang, Dawna Gruzja, Warsaw 1972, passim.

¹⁹ Shota Rustaveli, Rycerz w tygrysiej skórze, Kraków 1976, pp. 128-129, 144-145, 176-177.

²⁰ The present author hereby expresses her gratitude to Professor David Marshall Lang for the kind interest taken in the present study.