

# THE BEARD PULLING IN MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN ART: VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF A SCENE

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In memory of A. Agumaa, our friend and colleague

**Abstract:** The article deals with the problem of interpretation of the scene where one person pulls the beard of another one or two persons pull the beard each other. These scenes are relatively widespread (Western Europe, Caucasus, Transcaucasia, Albania), their date is between VI and XII centuries. In result of the research some scenes are identified (“Joseph’s dream”, illustration to one of the apocryphal episodes of “Acts of John”). The possible meanings of the scenes in question are also specified.

**Keywords:** Romanesque art, Caucasus, Abkhazia, Albania, Western Europe, architectural decoration, stone reliefs, frescoes, beard, crypt, church, iconography, medieval art

Christian iconography contains a lot of subjects with unclear interpretation. More difficult are the cases where unclear subjects could have several possible interpretations. That is the case of the scene where one man is pulling out the beard of another one or two men are pulling beards of each other. It can be seen on some Christian objects dating back to the Late Antiquity and Middle Ages. The semantic meaning of such a gesture and of beard in general in the medieval culture of the West and East was studied by Z. Jacoby<sup>1</sup>. Representations of beard pullers are not very frequent. They are present almost exclusively in medieval Christian architectural decoration. They could be divided in several types.

The scenes of secular characters with mutual aggressive pulling of the beard are among the most carefully studied. For example, representations of two men seizing each other by the beards can be seen in manuscripts and sculptural decoration of churches in Western Europe (in Ireland, England, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria and Hungary) starting with the 9<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacoby Z., *The beard pullers in Romanesques art: an Islamic motif and its evolution in the West // Arte medievale. Periodico internazionale di critica dell' arte medievale*. Vol. 1. 1987, p. 65.

century. Antique analogies of this subject are missing<sup>2</sup>. According to V. Darkevich, representations of fighting men and beard pullers could express anger and discord<sup>3</sup>; they were regarded even as the allegory of a sin<sup>4</sup>. However Z. Jacoby stresses the motif of reconciliation which is frequent on neighboring scenes, also pointing to their buffoonery character. Among the earliest examples of such type are the initials in the Book of Kells (around 800) and the base from the cross in Monasterboice (around 923), both from Ireland<sup>5</sup>. Fighting bearded men in the middle of a Romanesque capital in the church in Anzy-le-Duc (Saône-et-Loire, France, 1090–1130) and on the capital from the church Saint-Hilaire in Poitiers (now in Museum Saint-Croix) are among the most well-known representations of this scene<sup>6</sup>. On the above-mentioned monuments as well as on other representations of the same type, fighting bearded men clearly have a negative connotation. Such interpretation of the subject is due to the accompanying attributes (bearded masks that stick their tongues out, mocking human efforts) or the aggressive behavior of the figures in question (they threaten each other with axes). Z. Jacoby considers that this motif came to Romanesque art from the Islamic world<sup>7</sup>. But the earliest European examples originating from Ireland could probably have Celtic roots<sup>8</sup>.

Similar representations of two mutually aggressive secular figures of whom only one is pulling the other's beard is known not only in Romanesque art<sup>9</sup>, but also on the south façade of Holy Cross church on Akhtamar island (lake Van, 915–921). It is inserted in the frieze composed of a grapevine network. Two men are worn in shirtsleeves till knees encircled with a girdle. One of them seizes the beard of another. The latter holds the cudgel and lifts it against the first one. At their feet, there is a grinning animal looking like a dog. This subject got contradictory interpretations. Z. Jacoby and B. Freisitzer suggest here the Islamic influence comparing it with the other scenes of fighting and torment in Akhtamar<sup>10</sup>. On the contrary, Z. G.

<sup>2</sup>Jacoby Z., *The beard pullers...* p. 65 - 83; Volkov A. V., *Kod srednevekovja. Zagadki romanskih masterov (Code of Middle Ages. Puzzles of Romanesque masters)*. Moscow, 2013, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup>Darkevich V. P., *Narodnaja kultura Srednevekovja: parodja v literature i iskusstve IX-XVI centuries (Folk culture of Middle Age: parody in literature and art of IX – XVI cc)*, Moscow, 2010, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup>Jerman J., Weir A., *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches*, London, 2013, p. 106–110.

<sup>5</sup>Jacoby Z., op. cit., p. 77; Volkov A. V., op. cit., p. 332.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 334.

<sup>7</sup>Jacoby Z., op. cit.

<sup>8</sup>McNab S., *Celtic Antecedents to the Treatment of the Human Figure in Early Irish Art // From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and Its European Context* / Ed. by. C. Hourihane. Princeton, 2001, p. 168–169.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., fig. 9, 11, 17, 20.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 78; Freisitzer B., *Ein Tempel für einen König. Die Heilig-Kreuz Kirche von Akhtamar „Sourp-Chatsch“*. 915–21. Diplomarbeit. Wien, 2007. S. 89–90. S. Der Nersessian

Solakan<sup>11</sup> believes in the Armenian implication of the subject, considering it an illustration of the end of the epic story about damnation recited by King Artashes to his son Artavazd<sup>12</sup>. As to Solakan, the representation on the south façade of the Holy Cross church shows the last episode of this drama in which in order to fulfil the paternal malediction, a kadj (a Chthonian creature, a ghost living in mountains) pulls Artavazd by his beard into the depths of mountain Masis (Ararat).

In two above-mentioned cases, the beard pullers are mainly negative figures and evidently secular persons. Another meaning has a scene of beard pulling where both participants are positive characters and even, strange as it may seem, they are saints. There are also scenes, in which a Father of the Oecumenical Council tugs a heretic bishop by his beard for punishment and humiliation. Such representations occur twice in a Late Byzantine painting of Balkan (the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Veliko Tarnovo and the Church in Kozia)<sup>13</sup>. So, in Veliko Tarnovo, the patriarch-heretic is standing at the head of a group of his accomplices situated on the left, and a saint bishop is pulling his beard sitting in the group of saint Fathers to the left. They address the emperor sitting on the right on his throne.

Another type of the subject in question is shown on the stone relief conserved in the depots of the Abkhazian State museum, Sukhumi (fig. 1). Its provenance is unknown. The scene carved on it has not been identified yet, and its date is also unclear. The composition of the scene is dynamic. It is carved on the massive limestone slab whose form is almost square with a rectangular dent in its left upper corner. The scene is bordered with a sort of frame from three sides. The frame is made by thickening of borders of the slab. That is why the central part of the slab with the representation is deepened to its borders. The relief of the carving is expressive, therefore the figures look quite artistic. All three people wear the same type of long antique tunic with expressive folds on it. The central figure is shown three

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in her research about Akhtamar simply mentions it giving no interpretation (*Der Nersessian S. Aght'amar. Church of the Holy Cross. Cambridge (Mass.), 1965, p. 16*).

<sup>11</sup> Solakan Z. G., *Cosmology and cosmogony in Armenian petroglyphs*, Erevan, 2010 (in Armenian). p. 624-626., fig. 1337.

<sup>12</sup> «The subject of the last branch of epos is the interrelation between father and son, as well as the power of paternal damnation. People have believed in it till now. The epos firstly tells us about the constructional activity of Artashes. His people like him for it. Then it tells about the king's illness, death and solemn burial. Artavazd envies his father's glory and bitterly addresses his father, "You left and took all the land with you, how should I reign the ruins now?" His father accurses him by saying: "If you go hunting to Azat, Masis, kadjis will catch you and will bring you to Azat, Masis. You will stay there and will never see daylight anymore". The prediction was fulfilled. He was caught by kadjes during hunting..." (Abegjan M. *Istorja drevnearmjanskoj literatury (History of Ancient Armenian Literature)*, Erevan, 1975, p. 41-42).

<sup>13</sup> Walter Chr., *L'iconographie des conciles dans la tradition byzantine*, Paris, 1970, p. 258, fig. 37.

fourths of its height. One can distinguish the regular features of its face, large expressive eyes, a straight bow. The wavy hair is decorated with a diadem on the forehead.



Il. 1. Slab from the Abkhazian State Museum, Sukhum

The three figures are looking straight at the spectators. The tunic of the central person with a diadem flies dynamically as if it is in flight. With his left hand, he is holding the pointed beard of the second participant of the scene, and with his right hand, he is touching the third one who is shown horizontally parallel to the lower border of the frame. The features and garments of the second and the third figures (high forehead, smooth hair tightened from behind, pointed beard, straight bow, large eyes, long tunic fastened on his left shoulder) permit to identify them as one and the same person represented twice. The one standing on the right (of the spectator) upraises both hands to the right. His posture is dynamic due to the antithetic vectors of movement, his head following the beard pulled by the person with diadem who is slightly turned to one side, having both hands towards the other. In contrast to him, the posture of the third horizontal figure is static. His right hand is on his chest, his left hand joins the right one of the person with diadem. Thus the latter is the main and the most active participant of the action. He gives impulses to the two other figures.

The only monument that demonstrates nearly absolute likeness to the Sukhum slab is situated, strange as it may seem, in France<sup>14</sup>. On the capital of a column from the choir in the Church Notre-Dame-du-Port (Clermont-Ferrand, finished in 1185), the scene is carved which can be identified (due to the inscription) as Joseph's dream (fig. 2)<sup>15</sup>. The posture and gestures of the Angel and Joseph are very similar to the two standing figures on Sukhum slab. The features and the coiffure of the Angel (high forehead, hair parting in the middle) are practically identical to the left figure from Sukhum. The Angel also wears an antique tunic falling down with expressive folds. But the Angel on the capital has wings that are absent from Sukhum slab. This detail could probably be explained by the fact that the Angel is shown full-length and in a more static posture, whereas only the upper part of body of the person from Sukhum slab is carved. Besides, there is a dent on the place where his wings might be. Both persons (the Angel from Clermont-Ferrand and the figure with diadem from Sukhum) pull out the pointed beard of the second figure. The features and posture of Joseph from the capital and of the second person from the slab are also very similar. They both have high foreheads and pointed beards. Both personages slightly turn their heads to the Angel, their hands upraised, their body turned to the opposite side. Their garments differ a bit. Joseph from the capital wears shirt-sleeve encircled with a girdle and trousers, the personage from the slab has a long antique tunic. There is also a difference in the composition of the scene. The third figure on the slab from Sukhum is absent on the capital from Clermont-Ferrand. But this third horizontal figure resembles a lot to the second one, pulled by the beard (features, pointed beard, gesture of the right hand, garments). He seems to be the one and the same person. If we accept that the capital from Clermont-Ferrand and Sukhum slab show the same scene that is Joseph's dream, the presence of the third figure on the latter is explicable. It might be Joseph represented twice while dreaming (horizontally, he lies on the earth) and at the moment of admonition (the Angel pulls his beard). If it is true, Sukhum relief shows the more complete version of the iconography of the subject carved on the capital from Clermont-Ferrand.

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<sup>14</sup> Ricard M.-C., *Notre Dame du Port*, Clermont-Ferrand, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Look for details: <http://www.art-roman.net/ndport/ndport2.htm>; <http://sites.univ-provence.fr/pictura/GenerateurNotice.php?numnotice=A2450>.



II. 2. Capital of the colomn from the church Notre Dame du Port in Clermont-Ferrand

If we were to speak about stylistic parallels of Sukhumi slab, a similar Angel can be seen on the slab from altar barrier from Anukhva in Abkhazia (11th century)<sup>16</sup>. There, he is represented in the scene of Crucifixion. The Angel in the left upper corner is shown in the same posture as the figure with diadem from Sukhum (his body is in three fourths, head turning). The main difference, however, is that the Angel from Anukhva as well as the one from Clermont-Ferrand has the wings and the halo. Thus, if the above-stated identification is correct, the relief from Sukhum builds a simultaneous parallel to the Romanesque sculpture of the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Judging by its dimensions and the width of the slab (now it is only possible to size it up approximately), as well as by some stylistic analogies, it could be part of altar barrier of some church. If we were to accept that the slab represents Joseph's dream, it shows the full version of the rear iconography of the subject.

Finally, a similar type of pulling the beard of one person by another where both personages have undoubtedly positive characters can be seen in the painting of the Church of saints Forty Martyrs in Saranda (ancient Onchesmos in Southern Albania). This church is one of the most unusual examples of early Byzantine architecture which has preserved the height of

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<sup>16</sup> Shmerling R. O., *Malye formy v arhitekture srednevekovoj Gruzii (Minor forms in the architecture of medieval Georgia)*, Tbilisi, 1962. Tab. 58, p. 158, 159.

the walls till the period between the two world wars<sup>17</sup>. This is a large and long two-storied hall-type structure with altar apse. There are also three more apses on each side of the central hall. Such a scheme is unique, resembling only the Constantinopolitan church of St. Polyeuktos, reconstructed by J. Bardill<sup>18</sup>. The Church in Saranda might have had a dome. Another particularity of this church is the presence of two stories of subterranean structures. They look like funeral cells-cubicula, some of them with apses. Some of these subterranean chambers are covered with paintings, sometimes in several layers (up to three).

Such is the rectangular cubiculum B 18 covered with barrel vault. In the second layer of painting, there is a severely damaged image of a cross in the architectural coulisses of the face wall. In the third layer, there are partly damaged compositions of the sidewalls. On the left wall, one can see a large scene: two men in light tunics without sleeves are talking, sitting in a fishing boat under the sail. To the right of them, on the bank, one can see a man in a blue tunic and vinous himation, standing and addressing them. This composition was correctly identified by I. Vitaliotis as calling of John and James by Christ on the Lake of Gennesaret<sup>19</sup> (see below). On the right wall of the cubiculum, there are four unidentified scenes. On the right, there are two figures: the left one is bearded, wearing white garments and a halo (all the haloes in cubiculum are blue). Then is a male figure wearing white garments with halo bent probably over a sarcophagus; this figure is accompanied by other figures without a halo. In the central scene, a male figure in blue garments is turning right towards an object looking like a round box or a well wheel and towards two beanlike objects above it. Finally, on the left, one can see the most unusual scene: one bearded man of mean age (his face is badly damaged) in a vinous tunic and a blue himation is pulling the beard of another man of mean age in white garments. The latter's eyes are rolled up, his hands upraised (fig. 3). Initially, the third layer of the painting of the cubiculum was dated back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>20</sup>, but later it was correctly attributed to the late 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> On the church, see: Muka G., *Bazilika që i dha emrin Sarandës* // Monumentet. 2002. F. 7–40; Mitchell J., *The Archaeology of Pilgrimage in Late Antique Albania: The Basilica of the Forty Martyrs* // *Recent Research on the Late Antique Countryside* / Ed. by W. Bowden, L. Lavan and C. Machado. Leiden, 2003. p. 145–186; Vitaliotis I., *The Basilica of the Forty Martyrs, Albania: A pilgrimage church of the Early Christian Period* // *Routes of Faith in the Medieval Mediterranean*, Thessalonike, 2008, p. 403–413.

<sup>18</sup> Bardill J., *Église Saint-Polyeucte à Constantinople: nouvelle solution pour l'énigme de sa reconstitution* // *Architecture paléochrétienne* / Éd. par J.-M. Spieser. Gollion, 2011, p. 77–103, 155–158.

<sup>19</sup> Vitaliotis I., op. cit., p. 410, fig. 12–13.

<sup>20</sup> Hodges R., *Saranda, ancient Onchesmos. A short history and guide*, Tirana, б.г. p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> Vitaliotis I., op. cit., p. 409–410. fig. 12–14.



Il. 3. Christ pulls the beard of John. Fresco from cubiculum B18 under the church of Saint 40 martyrs in Saranda, Albania, V-VI centuries

Pulling one's beard as a hostile action is known well in Byzantine painting (see above), but since in Saranda, both figures have halos, this interpretation is impossible. The above-mentioned version of the interpretation as Joseph's dream does not go very well with Saranda's case, since here the beard puller is also bearded unlike the Angel. There is no reason to consider the scene, after I. Vitaliotis, even if cautiously, as the calling of the apostle Matthew<sup>22</sup>.

This unique composition could be explained as it seems only by the text of the apocryphal *Acts of John* (ch. 90) written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. This text was very popular in the Early Byzantine period<sup>23</sup>. «And behold, since He loved me, while He doesn't see I am approaching secretly to Him and standing looking at Him from behind. And I see that He does not wear any garments at all, but He is uncovered even of that what we see, and He is not completely man, His legs are whiter than snow so as the earth is shining

<sup>22</sup> Vitaliotis I., op. cit., p. 410, fig. 14.

<sup>23</sup> См.: Acta Johannis / Cura E. Junod et D. Kaestli. Turnhout, 1983 (Corpus christianorum. Series apocryphorum, 1–2).



under His feet, His head is setting against the sky. Therefore I cried being frightened, but He turned to me, appeared as a little man and having seized my beard pulled to Himself and said to me: “John, don’t be unfaithful but faithful and don’t be curious”. I said to Him: “What have I done, master?” I tell you, brothers, that the part of my beard that he had seized was so painful for thirty days that I asked Him: “Master, if pulling jokingly You hurt me so much, so what would be if You slapped me in the face?” And He answered to me: “It means that your deal is not to tempt the improvable”».

In favour of such an interpretation of the composition is the above-mentioned scene from the same cubiculum with the calling of John and James. The fact is that this subject is also mentioned in the same passage of the *Acts of John* (ch. 88) dedicated to the polymorphism of Jesus. One should also mention that despite later tradition, John is represented in Saranda not as a young or an old man, but as a man of mean age with black beard as in the *Acts of John*. Thereupon, it is probable that the other two above-mentioned scenes also illustrate the *Acts of John*.

The representation motives of these apocryphal subjects in the cubiculum of Saranda are not very clear. On the one hand, the customer of the paintings of the third layer could have been an adherent to the doctrine about the illusoriness of Jesus’s flesh (“docetism”) and multiformity of His apparition (“polymorphism”)<sup>24</sup> which was popular in the Early Christian period, but rejected by the Church in 4<sup>th</sup> century and to which some scenes from the *Acts of John* are dedicated. On the other hand, the right scene on the right wall of the cubiculum, where John (?) is bending over the bed of the deceased might probably be connected to the theme of Resurrection. It could be also an illustration to the *Acts of John*, 73–80, where John raises from the dead Kallimachos and Drusiana.

Judging by the fact that on the cubiculum’s painting, John is represented in white garments, in the right scene on the right wall, he is also a protagonist while Jesus is wearing here blue and vinous garments. It permits to identify Him in the second scene from the left, on the right wall which could be usual for the Early Christian and Early Byzantine iconography scene of the Multiplication of bread and fish. This subject is also interpreted in an apocryphal way in the same “polymorphical” passage from the *Acts of John* (ch. 93).

Thus, all the iconographical program of the cubiculum could be understood as following. The first scene seen by the visitor was the Calling of the apostles John and James taken from the *Acts of John*, 88. The cycle of apocryphal subjects (dedicated to polymorphism of Jesus) continued from there on the right wall by the scenes of the Pulling John’s beard (ch. 90) and the Multiplication of bread and fish (ch. 93). It was completed by the scene in

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<sup>24</sup> See: Junod E., *Polymorphie du Dieu sauveur // Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique* / Éd. par J. Ries. Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982, p. 38–46.

the crypt of Drusiana and by another unidentified scene which was probably also dedicated to the Resurrection of the dead.

Summarizing, we can single out three types of scenes representing the beard pulling in Christian art. The first type represents the fighting of secular characters. In one version of this type, both figures are beard pullers, they are negative and aggressive. In the other version of the first type, only one man pulls out the beard of the other. The latter is also aggressive. The second type shows one positive personage (a saint Father) who pulls out the beard of the negative one (a heretic). Both figures in this case are of religious and not secular character. Finally, in the third type of representations, one positive and even saint personage pulls out the beard of the other who is also a saint. In this case, the idea of admonition made by superior being to the inferior creature is underlined (the Angel instructs Joseph, Jesus instructs John). Here, one can see how the uncommon scene in Christian art of pulling the beard could serve for the transmission of quite different ideas and subjects which are almost never repeated, sometimes making difficult the identification of such a kind of composition.

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