Oriental and byzantine cultural influence on the territory of Belarus in the middle ages, as well as an attempt of the comparative analysis with the similar processes in Poland

Keywords: belarus, russian art, orient and byzantium, glass vessels

Introduction

In the 10th – 14th centuries the medieval towns of Belarus kept active contacts with the countries of the Christian and Islamic Orient (the Byzantine Empire, Syria, Iran, Central Asia, Caucasus, Khasaria, Volga Bulgaria, and the nomadic steppe). From these countries there came articles of mass import (glass and stone beads, amphorae, wine, oil, spices, fruit, nuts), as well as art objects (glassware, pottery, silk fabrics, artistic metal). In the articles of monumental painting and ornamental art of the medieval towns of Belarus of the 10th – 14th centuries there is a wide range of motifs adopted from the Oriental and Byzantine art: two confronted birds on the both sides of the tree of life, griffins, dragons, lions, panthers, a tripetalous or pentapetalous flower, a grape-vine, a blossoming cross. Chess came to the medieval Belarusian towns from Iran and Central Asia via Khazaria and Volga Bulgaria.

But none of the researchers paid due attention to these facts as a whole and considered the influence of the Oriental and Byzantine artistic tradition as one of the most important aspects of cultural and artistic life of the medieval towns of Belarus. Artistic intercourse between Russia and the Orient, its role in the historic development of the Old Russian art is a question raised long ago but not well elaborated. It was a cause for publicistic polemics rather than a subject of research. In Belarusian history of art this problem was not even posed until recently. It was western relations that were considered, with little attention paid to oriental, while they played an extremely important role in formation of the artistic environment where the development of the Old Russian art was taking place and, particularly, the art of the medieval towns of Belarus. Only in some researches certain issues of this extremely complex and broad topic were touched upon. Generally, only the articles of oriental import were studied. As for the local art works created under the influence of the artistic culture of the Orient, only a number of objects were noted and published. As a result a certain empirical material was accumulated; nevertheless, the issue of the Oriental influence on the art of the medieval towns of Belarus as a whole and versatile process remained unsolved. The goal of my research was to try to overcome the existing in the contemporary science of art fragmentariness in the interpretation of cultural and artistic connections of the medieval towns of Belarus with the Orient and Byzantium, and to reconstruct their entire picture and trace their dynamics.

By the Orient we shall understand the countries of the Middle East (first of all, Syria, Iran), Central Asia, Khasaria, Volga Bulgaria, the nomadic steppe, and also Byzantium and the Caucasus. The Byzantine artistic tradition is closely related with the oriental artistic tradition as at different stages of its development it had assimilated a number of motifs and means of artistic expressiveness of the oriental art. The art works under consideration mainly belong to the so-called world of small art which includes articles of ornamental art, articles of daily use, and adornments. To some extent, materials of monumental painting are involved. Furthermore, it is works of secular character related to the Oriental and Byzantine tradition that are considered. An extensive stratum of Christian antiquities was deliberately left aside as it is an issue for a separate big research. As said by Y.L. Shchapova, the world of “small” (ornamental) art organically united not only products of the local handicraft and artistic handicraft in general, but also imports, “nearby, faraway, direct and indirect”. That is why it would be reasonable to precede the analyses of the works of the local handicraft with determination of a range of the imported goods of the Oriental and Byzantine origin used in the territory of Belarus. One of the most interesting articles of the Oriental and Byzantine imports to the medieval towns of Belarus was glassware. Glassware painted with gold and enamel or decorated with carving and engraving was a luxury article and had a high value. There were also plain vessels, without painting, bottles for domestic and chemical purposes, but the bulk of the import glassware was intended for magnificent parties. This glassware arrived from Byzantium and Syria and dated to the 12th -13th centuries.

Finds from Novogrudok make the most numerous collections of glass vessels of the highest quality of the Byzantine and Oriental origin. F.D Gurevich, who had excavated in Novogrudok, affirmed that not a single town of Rus or Europe gave as many glassware related to the Orient as Novogrudok did. In Novogrudok there were found more than 340 fragments of glass vessels of Byzantine and Oriental origin. About 70 of them belong to 8 vessels made in Syrian ateliers (Raqq, Aleppo). The other fragments by shape and ornament belong to more than 40 vessels from Byzantium. Among other medieval Belarusian products of the local handicraft and artistic handicraft in general, but also imports, “nearby, faraway, direct and indirect”. That is why it would be reasonable to precede the analyses of the works of the local handicraft with determination of a range of the imported goods of the Oriental and Byzantine origin used in the territory of Belarus. One of the most interesting articles of the Oriental and Byzantine imports to the medieval towns of Belarus was glassware. Glassware painted with gold and enamel or decorated with carving and engraving was a luxury article and had a high value. There were also plain vessels, without painting, bottles for domestic and chemical purposes, but the bulk of the import glassware was intended for magnificent parties. This glassware arrived from Byzantium and Syria and dated to the 12th -13th centuries.

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towns it is Turov that is known for the finds of Byzantine and Oriental glass but they are much less numerous than those in Novogrudok—15.² Fragments of Byzantine and Oriental glassware were also found in Mstislavl, Vitiebsk, Grodno, Volkovysk, Slonim, Drutsk.² Byzantine glassware was found in Novogrudok, Turov, Vitiebsk, Polotsk, and Minsk. The most numerous group of Byzantine goods is thin-sided vessels made of transparent colourless, purple, blue and milk-white glass, painted gold, or gold in combination with white, yellow and red enamel. The main painting motifs are birds, medallions, twigs, straight or wavy lines, crosses (simple and with crossed arms), circles and other geometrical elements. These vessels are represented by bottles, beakers, bowls and other forms. A separate group is represented by two beakers from the series of the so-called Hedwig’s beakers (Hedwigsglasier), found in Novogrudok. Syrian glassware was found in Novogrudok, Turov, Grodno, Slonim, Volkovysk, Vitiebsk, Drutsk, Mstislavl, Polotsk. Most of the Syrian vessels found in the territory of Belarus are vessels made from the transparent glass painted with gold and enamels — the so-called Raqa and Aleppo groups. In Volkovysk and Polotsk the vessels of dark blue transparent glass decorated with white opaque strips were found as well. They relate to the Egyptian or Syrian manufacture of the 13th century. Another group of the Syrian vessels presented by finds from the territory of Belarus is that of vessels decorated with plated glass threads (Novogrudok).

Apart from the vessels fragments, there are fragments of Byzantine glass bracelets found on the territory of Belarus. They have several characteristics which mark them out from the basic mass of bracelets of Kiev origin and local production.³ First of all they are distinguished by the chemical composition of the glass — they belong to the Na-Ca-Si class (to both its subclasses — sodium and ash). Secondly, they are united by a number of formal features. The probable Byzantine bracelets are notable for a variety of shapes and decoration. Painting with gold and enamels is one of their characteristics, the others are the prevalence of the colour blue (oxide cobalt was used as a dye), and they have inner surface flat, outer surface curved, sometimes with a more complicated side view, or square as well as triangular form. The glazed ceramics was another important article of the Oriental imports. The Iranian ceramics with luster paintings (Novogrudok, Volkovysk, Mstislavl) and the malni ceramics (Grodno)³ used by the medieval elite are especially notable. These painting techniques require double firing and expensive components. Besides, in the medieval Belarusian towns (Novogrudok) the ceramics of the lakabi type (semifusione with flat carving, engraving and polychromatic paintings) made in the 12th century was presented.

Findings of the Byzantine glazed ceramics in the territory of Belarus are not numerous. They are presented both by first class white clay ceramics with five-colour underglaze paintings (Polotsk) and by simpler samples with a decor in the sgraffito technique (Turov, Minsk) as well as by red clay ceramics with white engobe under green or turquoise glaze (Novogrudok, Volkovysk). Another category of the Oriental import ceramics in the medieval towns of Belarus was the Golden Horde ceramics. The bulk of finds is fragments of its most widespread group — kashi ceramics with a relief modelling of the surface and polychrome underglaze painting (Novogrudok, Lukoml, Slonim, Drutsk, Grodno). Most likely, the Golden Horde ceramics came to Belarus not so much by trading ways but as the personal property of Tatars.⁴

Another significant group of Byzantine and Oriental imports to the medieval towns of Belarus was silk fabrics. They were one of the main objects of the international trade of the medieval world. According to ZM Sergeeva, in the territory of Belarus fragments of silk fabrics were found in sixteen archaeological sites: Lisno, Putil’koviči, Polesečka, Virkov, Azaryany, Novy Bykhov, Mstislavl, Vlazovichi, Minsk, the Minsk barrows, Novogrudok, Grodno, Garozi, David-Gorodok, Mozyr, Breš. Most of the silk fabrics are of Byzantine manufacture, they were found in twelve archaeological sites from the sixteenth considered.⁵ In the territory of Belarus the finds of silk fabrics are concentrated in the Dnieper river basin and its feeders which shows their travel way.⁶ Almost half of all fragments come from barrows, the others — from the town occupation layers. A small number of silk fabrics finds may be explained by the fact that they badly remain in the ground. A small group of the Oriental imports into the medieval towns of Belarus is metal articles. It includes a small copper jug with a rounded belly, a narrow neck and spayed rim found in Slonim in the layers of the 11th — 14th centuries.⁷ In the territory of the Upper Castle in Polotsk there was found a small bronze figure of bird which is most likely to be a detail of the jug of the oriental origin, serving as a rest for the thumb when pouring liquid (the 12th century).⁸

Presence of numerous and various objects of Byzantine and Oriental import bear evidence of trends and character of artistic tastes of people of the medieval towns of Belarus. Besides, they served as samples for the local masters and thus have played an important role in the spreading of Oriental motifs in the art of the medieval towns of Belarus of the 10th — 14th centuries. From the territory of Belarus

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³ Poluboyarinova MD Glassware of Ancient Turov // Soviet Archeology. 1963. No. 4. P. 235, 238, Fig. 2, 1, 8, 12.
⁹ Vzvergo Ya. G. Archaeological work in Slonim // Belarus and I are trying out: Materyny Kanferençys archeologii BSSR izmaznych teatriv. - M., 1972. - P. 269, Fig. 21.
there came a number of works of monumental painting and artistic handicraft of the 10th – 14th centuries which is indicative of loan and transformation of motifs from the Oriental and Byzantine art traditions on the local soil. Here refers images of birds of a certain iconographic type, griffins, dragons, lions, panthers. Besides, there are direct imitations, or more or less free copying of oriental samples, as well as a creative remaking of the oriental motifs. In jewellery the East Slavs had borrowed many traditions from the Oriental - Byzantine world. It was from there that such techniques as cloisonné enamel, filigree, granulation, and niello came to Rus. There were considerable loans in the jewellery attire. Researchers consider that some traditions, and, first of all an oriental one played an important role in the formation of the shape of the Old Russian belt with metal belt appliques. Hazaria and Volga Bulgaria could be a concrete conductor of the oriental ornament. In the territory of Belarus similar belt details were found in Zaslavl, the barrows of Gomel, Brest, Vitебsk and Minsk Regions. 13

Temple pendants (kolty) with enamel and niello, suspension chains (ryasy), temple rings with three beads and of the Volhynian type, princely diadems similar to the diadems of the Byzantine and European rulers, neckpieces-humerals (barmy), hinged bracelets (consisting of two semicircular sections), twisted and plaited bracelets with terminals decorated with filigree and granulation refer to the remaking of the Byzantine samples in the Old Russian ceremonial attire. 14

From the Orient to Rus there came earrings in the form of a question mark, which were popular in the 14th century. They were made of the wire core bent like a question mark, with a bead at its end. In the territory of Belarus such earrings were found in Grodno, Novogradov, Volkovysk, the rural settlements of the Ponemanye. Similar earrings are known in antiquities of Volga Bulgaria and the Golden Horde. 15

Like in Rus in the artistic handicraft of the medieval towns of Belarus, though to a lesser degree, there are traced a number of motifs borrowed from the Oriental and Byzantine ornamental repertoire. They can be divided into two groups: vegetative and zoomorphic. The vegetative ornament reflects the vegetation world; it is connected with the idea of fertility and has good-minded character. In the works related to the Christian cult, and in a wider range of works, it personifies not only the terrestrial flora, but also is a symbolic vision of the Paradise. The vegetative ornament was widely used in all art forms: monumental painting, artistic handicraft, ornamentation of manuscripts. Byzantine vegetative ornamentation had a great influence on the development of the Rus vegetative ornament; moreover, it is possible to speak about transfer of the Byzantine vegetative ornament to the East Slavic soil as the Byzantine artists took part in painting of Old Russian churches. In the paining of the churches the vegetative ornament decorated slopes of windows, arches, columns, it was used as a dividing decorative belt between the subject compositions. In the territory of Belarus fragments of this kind of paining have remained in Polotsk churches (The Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia), the Belchitsy Borisoglebsky monastery, Spaso-Preobrazhenskaya church of St. Euphrosyne monastery). Works of artistic handicraft with vegetative ornamentation were found almost everywhere (Polotsk, Vitебsk, Minsk, Grodno, Novogradov, Volkovysk, Brest, Drutsk, David-Gorodok, Vishchin (Rogachev District of Gomel Region), Maskovichi (Brlasv District of Vitебsk Region), Gomel, Mstislaw).

One of the most widespread vegetative motifs is a tripetalous flower, in its complicated variant – pentapetalous. It is an original element on the basis of which various ornamental compositions were created. The motif of the grape-vine – a common medieval, international motif – was also very popular. On the goods coming from Belarus its most simple version is presented. Another popular ornamental motif is the blossoming cross, the bottom of which has pair vegetative branches, often considerably developed and complicated. Among zoomorphic motifs borrowed from the Oriental and Byzantine art culture, the motif of the bird was one of the most popular. The majority of images of birds differ by a steady iconography going back to the Byzantine samples. In many cases a characteristic detail is a double tail, one part of which corresponds to the usual tail position and the other is a semicircle rising upwards, often it has vegetative curls at the end. Another widespread iconographic feature is collars of birds, which comes from the Oriental and Byzantine art. The head of the bird is often turned back. The species identification, as a rule, is not clear; it is a generalised image of the bird. Semantics of birds in general can be defined as protective and good-minded, in the Christian tradition connected with the theme of the paradise and salvation, and in secular aspect – with the idea of the family well-being. Birds of prey are connected with the power symbols; however in the art of Russ their predatory features are often levelled. An antithetic composition of two birds located on the sides of the Tree of Life is a very popular. In most cases this composition decorates the temple pendants (kolty) and in a very similar way. Works of artistic handicraft with the motif of the bird were found in the territory of Belarus in Polotsk, Minsk, Vitебsk, Drutsk, Vishchin, Romanovo.

A widespread motif is the griffin. This fantastic image connected with the idea of the power, combines the protomai of the eagle and the lion. The image and iconography of the griffin was developed in the ancient states of West Asia. The image of the griffin continued to be developed in the art of the barbarous people of Eastern and Western Europe, especially of those who had close contacts with the oriental cultures. In the Old Russian art the image of the griffin in its oriental iconographic variant was adapted. 17 The motif of the griffin is present on the works from Vitебsk, Minsk, Pinsk, Novogradov, Polotsk.

The image of the dragon combines the protomai of the beast, the bird and the reptile. In most cases it is a winged being with a snake tail which its body turns to. In the East Slavic variant the dragon is a very indefinite being, it is a free variations on the theme of the dragon. The muzzle is usually similar to the dogs. In the second half of the 13th century the image of the dragon in Old Russian artistic

handicraft received an additional impulse from the side of the Golden Horde traditions. Semantics of the dragon is dual: it personified a kind, protective and a malicious matter. On the ornaments and objects of every-day life it had a patronising meaning and did not differ in this respect from the image of the gryphon. Images of dragons decorate products from Gomel, Polotsk, Turov, Grodno, Novogrudok, Vologysk. Another group of motifs of the oriental origin includes lions and predators of the cat family. The image of the lion, as well as its iconography, came to Russ from the Orient and was connected with protective symbolism. The image of the lion is many-sided. In the majority of mythological systems it is a symbol of the higher divine power, strength, authority and greatness, the Sun and fire. In the Ancient Orient a lion was a deity, later – the deity’s companion, a companion, a guard and an emblem of the tsar, and also a hostile force against which the tsar struggled. This many-sided nature was reflected in the Bible and in interpretations of church fathers. The prevalence of the image of the lion was conditioned by its emblematic meaning. In some cases the lion quite definitely reflected the idea of the prince’s power. Apparently, the images of predators with less definite specific character also associated with similar ideas. Wild animals could symbolise the power, military value, as well as play a role of guards. The motive of lions and the cat predators is available on the works from Grodno, Vologysk, Mtsislav, Staroye Odnopolye (Vetka District of Gomel Region), Vitebsk, Slonim.

All borrowed zoomorphic motifs have features of vivid stylisation. Among these are collars and belts-girths on wild animals, dots and circles decorating the bodies of animals and birds, the vegetative curls getting from the mouth, which was a stylisation of the protruding tongue, fantastic double tails of the birds, the blossoming tails of animals in the characteristic position (passed between the hindpaws and lifted sideways upwards). All these decorative features are characteristic of the Iranian and Byzantine Art. The above zoomorphic motifs in small plastic arts and jewellery got their further development in teratological style of manuscripts of the 13th–14th centuries, for which a combination of fantastic and real beings, strap-work and vegetative forms are typical. By interweaving and turning wonderfully into each other, they form fanciful compositions of the initials and headpieces. The most popular character of teratological compositions was a fantastic being like a gryphon or a dragon-bird whose feet were usually entangled with strap-work.

Undoubtedly, there is a difference between zoomorphic images in jewellery and small plastic arts and teratological style of manuscripts: different stylistic characteristics, different principles of composition, and the ornament organisation; however, continuity of the basic motifs (the stylised real and fantastic animals) is obvious. This was suggested by NP Kondakov and later by AS Gushchin who considered jewellery with zoomorphic motifs as a link with teratological ornament of manuscripts. A reverse variant is also possible when at creation of works of artistic handicraft the initials and headpieces of manuscripts were used as samples. Thus, they often preserved a compositional construction and features of hand-written samples execution. The following manuscripts of teratological style are connected with the territory of Belarus: the Mstizh Gospel, the Sunday’s Gospel of Polotsk, The Dialogues of Saint Gregory Dialogos, the Drutsk Gospel, the Pinsk Gospel. All of them date back to the 14th century, i.e. to the mature period of teratology development.

It is interesting to notice that in the 11th – 12th centuries in the Oriental and Byzantine art, for reasons not well understood, there was a surge of zoomorphic images, a heightened interest in zoomorphic images. Oriental and Byzantine art rich in these motifs influenced the subject repertoire of Eastern and Western European art.

In the images of the fantastic and real animals borrowed from the Oriental and Byzantine art, a considerable transformation in iconography and stylictics is observed: they lose the iconographic definiteness, often approach the real images, predatory features are levelled, but features of presentability are emphasised. However, apotropaic semantics of these images are drawn closer with the oriental prototypes.

By stylictics these images, undoubtedly, are far from the oriental polymorphs, however it is possible to find certain correspondence here if interpret style (according to GA Fyodorov-Davydov’s definition) as a certain art world outlook, vision system, a method of construction and understanding of forms. In Old Russian, Oriental and Byzantine are a number of cultural and world outlook parallels are observed: an object or a figure was represented as a symbol of the idea standing behind them; ornamental compositions were symbolical analogues of the world view. Besides, they are also united by specificity of means of art expressiveness: flatness, local colour, static character and symmetry of the compositions subordinated to strict frameworks of the canon. These conceptually-symbolical and formal-distributive relations have defined an art method and character of the Oriental, Byzantine and Old Russian art.

It is necessary to touch on an issue of similarity of zoomorphic motifs in art of Rus and Romanesque Europe. Many researchers came to the conclusion that they had come to Rus’ as a result of contacts with Romanesque art. Partly it is fair, but even in this case it does not change their oriental origin as none of the researchers denied that they had come to Romanesque Art from the East. G.L.Nikol in the publication on the parallels in architectural ornamentics of Saxony and the Vladimir-Suzdal princeedom, noticed that it was quite possible that the masters working in Vladimir knew the Saxon monuments, but it cannot be proved and that some similar motifs can be explained by community of sources for both cultures. Undoubtedly, Romanesque and Old Russian art are close in certain relations. They operate with almost the same set of images in the similar political conditions. Latin Europe and Rus aspired to join the heritage of civilisations of the Orient and Byzantium, whose magnificence and superiority were obvious. From this heritage various polymorphs (gryphons, senmurvs, dragons), lions, eagles, heraldic antithetical compositions, scenes of single combats, hunting, chase, a predator clawing a vegetarian

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animal were borrowed. These old oriental images processed in religious symbolism of early medieval Iran, and also Byzantium, were transferred to art of Europe.

An especially important role in transfer of motifs of the Oriental and Byzantine art was played by silk fabrics and toolettes – desired trophies and diplomatic gifts which were stored in treasuries of churches and rulers. The enamels from Ortokid Syria brought by crusaders to Europe generated a lot of imitations in workshops of Limoges. Romanesque art of Poland gives a number of examples of adoption of vegetative and zoomorphic motifs borrowed from the Oriental and Byzantine tradition in the Christian culture: an architectural decor of I the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow (the so-called St. Gereon’s Church), II the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow (St. Florian), St. Florian’s Church in Krakow, the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Częstochowa, church of Joanites in Zągot’s, bronze doors of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Gniezno, an architectural decor and ceramic tiles in the Benedictine abbey in Tyniec and in the Monastery of the Sisters of St. Norbert Convent in Strzelno, floor tiles of Collegiata of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Włocławek, parts of bronze settings of manuscripts from the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Włocławek and Cistercians Abbey in Wąchock, ceramic tiles from the workshop of architectural ceramics on the Lech Hill in Gniezno, ceramic tiles from the Cistercian Sisters Church in Trzebnica (the 12th – the middle of the 13th centuries).23 In most cases these motifs accompany the scenes of Christian iconography and, thus, perform a symbolic and accompanying function.

Besides, from southeast regions of modern Poland there came a number of works of artistic handicraft connected with the Oriental and Byzantine tradition (temple pendants (kolty) with the image of the gryphon, a part of the diadem with the image of the lion, used as a belt applique, a ring with the image of the bird on its bezel, a belt appliqués from Trepcza,24 a dies for making temple pendants (kolty) with image of confronted birds from Chelm, three-head temple rings from Przemyśl, Trojca, Trepcza, 12th – 14th centuries) which relate to the so-called Cherven towns belonging either to Poland or to Rus and from the 13th century known as Red Rus or Galician-Volhynian Rus. In Krakow on the Wawel Castle and in Ostrow Lednicki (in the burials of the castle church used as a burial vault) there was found jewellery which may be connected with the material culture of the Kievan Rus and Byzantium (three-head temple rings, a pendant from rock crystal set in gold).25 A small group of encolpions and crosses found in Krakow, Trepcza and Sączotno, spindle whorls made of Ovруч slate, and painted ceramic Easter egg (pysanka)26 found in Kraków are indicative of contacts between Poland and Rus. Medieval Poland aspired to join the Oriental and Byzantine art tradition as evidenced by a number of works: a casque-reliquary of the Middle East or Sicilian origin from the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow (12th century),27 silk fabrics from treasuries of churches, as well as Byzantine-Balkan and Byzantine-Russian paintings of the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in Sandomir, Chapel of the Holy Trinity in the castle in Lublin, Chapel of Stephen Bathory in the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow (the beginning of the 15th century).

A number of works coming from Poland are connected with the West European tradition of reconsideration of motifs of the oriental art and belong to the so-called Western European masters: bowl from Włocławek (10th c.), aquamanile from the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow (second half of the 12th c.), the cross from the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow at manufacture of which diadems (the 13th century) were used for the second time.28 In the 13th century the difference between the stylistic characteristics of art of Latin Europe and Russ became especially evident. In late Romanesque and Gothic tradition of Latin Europe, which the art of Poland belonged to, naturalism and zoomorphism, desire for volume prevailed, while in art of Russ the convention of image, symbolic character and flatness still dominated. Distinctions also concerned the semantics of zoomorphic images. In art of Latin Europe they were still understood for some time in the oriental spirit as patronising and kind beings. The motif of two griffons in the heraldic composition was very popular on sepulchral monuments in medieval France. Gryphons were depicted on the choir screens, on baptisteries as guards against sinful forces, often the gryphon was depicted as a symbol of the Christ. The adaptation of the image of a gryphon in Christian culture of Latin Europe is proved by the image of the gryphon on the silver bracteate of the unknown governor at the National Museum in Krakow.29 Under the gryphon’s belly there was a cross, which, most likely, emphasized its Christian symbolism. In this case the gryphon as an amphibian, which combined the features of two monarchical animals, the eagle and the lion, was a union of the air and the earth and symbolically was indicative of the union of the Divinity and human nature in Christ. But in course of the development of theological criticism the protective meaning of these images was vanishing. In Romanesque art they incurred chimerization and were moved into the realm of demonology, became an embodiment of sins and vices, and were used as didactic allegories to warn sinners. Kindly, protective meaning of the beast images in Russ was preserved for a longer time than in Western Europe.30

A very important issue is how zoomorphic motifs borrowed from the oriental art tradition and having pre-Christian sources functioned in art of Christian Rus. Undoubtedly, decorating the works of Christian art, they could not have the pagan sense anymore which was put in them earlier. Images of fantastic and real animals had been assimilated in the Christian culture of Russ and united with the Bible idea of praising the God by all living beings – “Let every breath praise the Lord!” In the monograms related to the Christian cult, these motifs had an accompanying and symbolical character, they accompanied the images of the Christian iconography and helped to reveal their symbolical meaning. Besides, zoomorphic images borrowed of the Oriental and Byzantine ornamental repertoire were perceived in the


27Ibidem, s. 394, nr. 14; s.387, nr.6, 425-426.

East Slavic environment as an attribute of prestige, international fashion to which everybody aspired to. It is possible to suggest several ways of penetration of the Oriental motifs into art of Russ, including art of the medieval towns of Belarus. Extremely important sources of their spreading were the items of import, which served as samples for the local craftsmen. Besides, they were presented not only on the Oriental goods, but also on the Byzantine ones. Taking into consideration a significant role played by the Byzantine art in formation of Old Russian art, it is possible to say that many Oriental images got to Rus in the Byzantine version. An important role in transmission of elements of the Oriental culture and art was played by the nomadic steppe. It is possible to suggest that penetration of the motifs of the Oriental origin came both from the Orient, including Byzantium, and from the West, where a parallel process of adoption of the Oriental and Byzantine images was taking place.

**Conclusion**

The above finds, their iconographic and stylistic peculiarities allow affirming that contacts with Orient and Byzantium held a prominent place in the cultural and artistic life of the medieval towns of Belarus. To reveal these connections is extremely important for the complete understanding of conditions of formation and peculiarities of art development of the whole East-Slavic circle. It is these connections that determined the specific character of the East-Slavic art tradition.

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**Conflict of interest**

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