

# Joanna Rydzkowska

---

## Toros Roslin : between the East and the West

---

Series Byzantina 7, 93-99

---

2009

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

## *Toros Roslin – – between the East and the West*

Joanna Rydzkowska, Toruń

Cilicia is a historical region in the south-central part of Asia Minor, which today is the south-east part of Turkey. The Armenian dynasty of Rupenids gained part of Cilicia as early as the ninth century, but the status of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia was granted only at the end of the twelfth century, when after the conquest of Armenia by Seljuq Turks, a great number of Armenians settled there. Owing to its location at the intersection of the main trading routes, Cilicia soon gained a significant position in international trade. Natural topographic features, such as the mountain range and the sea coast surrounding the region, guaranteed relative peace. It lay on the route of the Crusades. While the crusaders imposed their presence on other countries, their Armenian hosts maintained good relations with the European knights on account of their common faith, common enemy and diplomatic, open nature.<sup>1</sup> Under the influence of the crusaders, Cilician Armenia formed a union with the Roman Catholic Church, which was not accepted by other Armenians. All these circumstances and kings' farsighted policy contributed to the fact that the Kingdom of Cilicia was developing very well for 200 years, its prosperity increased and the arts flourished. However, in the mid- fourteenth century the Mamluk invasion put an end to the existence of the Kingdom of Cilicia.

Many artists moved to Cilicia from Armenia, helping to develop centres of the art of illumination and therefore continue Armenian tradition. In the beginning, books brought from Great Armenia were being copied. Due to the fact that the artists came from various regions, their works were diverse. Over time, painters of miniature developed their individual style, which was outstanding because of its sophisticated drawing and very decorative character. The manuscripts from Cilicia are usually of smaller size than the ones made in Great Armenia, which may be explained in two ways: either they

---

<sup>1</sup> D. M. Lang, *Armenia kolebka cywilizacji*, Warszawa 1975, p. 192.

were earmarked for individual reading, or the majority of liturgical books have not survived. A significant change introduced by Cilician painters was that the illustrations coincided with the text exactly, whereas the illustrations in Great Armenia preceded the text of Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

The style of Cilician miniature painting was virtually homogenous, but still a few centres stood out, each of them exhibiting characteristic features. Monasteries were the most significant art centres: Hromkla, where catholicos resided, Drazark, Akner and Grner near Sis, and Skevra. In the thirteenth and at the beginning of fourteenth century Cilician art had a very prominent influence on the art of Great Armenia and Armenian colonies in other countries.<sup>3</sup> The crowning period of the art of Cilician illumination falls between 1250 and 1290, the time of the work of Toros Roslin.

Toros Roslin is the most famous and eminent Armenian illuminator of the medieval period. He was born between 1210 and 1216. At the age of 13 or 14 he began his education in one of the Cilician scriptoria. Then, he studied and travelled for 18 years. After this preparation he became an assistant to a master of miniature painting and for seven or eight years he worked in a scriptorium. Between the age of 30 and 40 he became a miniature painter in his own right and he could run his own workshop.<sup>4</sup> He worked mainly in the scriptorium at Hromkla monastery, which next to the capital of Cilicia, Sis, was one of the most important centres of culture and science in Cilician Armenia. The last known work of Roslin is a Gospel made on the order of Prince Vasak after his return from Egypt in 1268 year. Therefore the artist must have still been alive in 1269.

The fact that is very interesting is that Toros had a surname. In medieval times the privilege of having a surname was entitled only to the nobility, and it is virtually impossible that a craftsman, a miniature painter, was at the same time a nobleman. The puzzle was solved by Professor L. Chookashian who discovered that in Scotland, close to Edinburgh, there is a small town – Roslin – and a chapel bearing the same name. The former owner, Henry Sinclair (other: St. Clair), baron of Roslin, participated in the crusade in 1096. It was evidently love that stopped him in Cilicia, because he got married and settled there for good. Toros was probably a descendant of this Scottish knight. It appears from a colophon in the manuscript from 1260, which was written by Roslin, that he was a priest and had children.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> E. Korchmazian, I. Drampian, G. Hakopian, *Armenian Miniatures of the 13th and 14th centuries from the Matanadaran Collection Yerevan*, Leningrad 1984, pp. 20–21.

<sup>3</sup> W. Molè, *Z zagadnień iluminatorstwa bizantyńskiego i ormiańskiego*. Lwów 1939, p. 21. Cf. T. M. Mathews, 'L'art de la Cilicie: l'Arménie des croisades', in: *Armenia Sacra. Mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IV–XVIIIe siècle)*, (ex. cat. Musée du Louvre), ed. J. Durand, I. Rapti, D. Giovannoni, Paris 2007, pp. 255–263.

<sup>4</sup> L. Chookashian, *Toros Roslin*. [http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/ArmeniaDigitalProject\(12.01.2008r.\)](http://armenianstudies.csufresno.edu/ArmeniaDigitalProject(12.01.2008r.)).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

The Roslin works that survive are seven signed manuscripts, dated between 1256 and 1268. The artist probably both copied and illuminated them in Hromkla.<sup>6</sup> Sirarpie der Nersessian proved that three additional manuscripts which have survived fragmentarily, sometimes added to other books, were also made by Roslin.<sup>7</sup>

In early thirteenth century Cilicia the illustrations of manuscripts were confined to ornaments on title pages, margins, canon tables and evangelists' portraits. However, in as early as the middle of the century Roslin used a wide range of figural scenes with a developed iconographic meaning.<sup>8</sup> What primarily links Roslin's manuscripts is plenty of illustrations and a variety of forms, subjects and colors. Figures on his miniatures have proportions almost accordant with natural ones, and the drapery of their clothes draw a body shape. The artist aspired to breaking medieval canons by presenting spatial depth and perspective, thanks to which he is called "Giotto of the East".

Toros Roslin travelled a lot during his educational period; undoubtedly, he observed and attentively studied European art. He also had the opportunity to familiarize himself with European manuscripts brought to Hromkla by French missionaries.<sup>9</sup> We can find traces of his observations and inspirations, mainly of Italian art, in all his works. Two Crucifixion scenes painted by Roslin in 1262 and 1268 could be a good example of these inspirations.

The first one comes from Sebastia Gospel (Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery no 539). The figure of Christ, which dominates the composition, is close to Byzantine representations, but Maria and the apostle John are much richer in emotions than their equivalents in canonical Byzantine scenes. In both miniatures an old man appears on the right side, who, frightened or surprised by the dramatic scene, keeps his hand on his beard. This figure does not appear in Eastern art, but we can find it in Crucifixion scenes painted by Nicola Pisano, Guido da Siena and Cimabue, that is, in North Italy.

In the second miniature, which comes from so-called Malatian Gospel (Erevan, Matenadaran, no 10675), there is an element taken from Italian art, namely the representations of Ecclesia and Synagogue. The former holds a reliquary in the shape of a model of a chapel. Synagogue, blindfolded and turned back from the Cross, holds a broken reed in her right hand, and an angel is knocking a crown from her head. These details were unknown till that time in Eastern art. Ecclesia with the reliquary appears in a low relief made by Nicola Pisano in Pisa, and an angel knocking off the crown can be

---

<sup>6</sup> The manuscripts are follows: Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran) in Yerevan, ms. 10450, 1075; Armenian Patriarchate of St. James in Jerusalem: ms. 251, 2660, 1956, 2027; Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore: ms. 539.

<sup>7</sup> S. der Nersessian, *Miniature Painting in Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia from the Twelfth to Fourteenth Century*, Washington 1993, pp. 51–54.

<sup>8</sup> T. F. Mathews, A. K. Sanjian, *Armenian Gospel Iconography. The Tradition of the Glajor Gospel*. Washington 1991, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

seen in *Descent from the Cross* by Benedetto Antelami in the cathedral in Parma. Thus we have evidence that Roslin knew current trends in Italian art very well, though he did not copy passively, but he adopted some elements and in a deliberate way combined them with Byzantine and Armenian art.

Roslin is probably the author of the oldest preserved Cilician royal portrait – an image of prince Levon, the son of Hatum I.<sup>10</sup> According to some sources, the portrait was painted in about 1250 on the occasion of the prince's fifteenth birthday. There are five preserved portraits of the prince, later king Levon III, painted during his lifetime. Roslin was the author of two of them; the others were made by unknown artists.

Prince Levon was a very well educated and enlightened person, considered a bibliophile by his contemporaries.<sup>11</sup> The period of his reign (1270–1289) was quite turbulent, due to the attacks of Mamluks and revolts of some Cilician barons. Both Levon's portraits were painted by Roslin before the coronation, when an alliance with Mongols guaranteed a relative peace.

The first portrait of Levon represents him as a young boy. The portrait continues the tradition of representing members of the royal family, well known in Armenia from the tenth century.<sup>12</sup> The prince is standing face-on, dressed in a richly ornamented tunic and a purple mantle. All other details are evidence of him being represented as a saintly person. The prince's head is surrounded by a nimbus; he is accompanied by two angels with liturgical vessels, and in the right hand he is holding a green sprig. This latter attribute was common between twelfth and fourteenth century in French seals with the representations of various saints holding a flower or an olive spring.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, this attribute also underlines the holiness of the heir to the throne.

Taking into consideration the close dependence of Armenian art on Byzantine art, it is clear that Roslin took the liberty of departing quite far from Byzantine canon and common schemes. For example, in Byzantium emperors and heirs to the throne were usually represented with a beard and a diadem. However, in this case we can see a young boy with long hair, without a beard or headgear. Actually, a hypothesis was put forward that this is a representation of the prince as Christ in an apollonian type.<sup>14</sup> The prince's clothes are a rare example of the representation of Armenian heraldic attire. What draws particular attention is the tunic ornamented with clearly visible medallions, in which lions with a red disc are represented. The use of a lion motif in a prince's attire is not surprising, because his name – Levon – is an equivalent of European name Leon, that is, 'Lion'. Levon's ancestors, prince Levon II (1187–1198)

<sup>10</sup> Sirarpie der Nersessian proved that the miniature which represents Prince Levon, attached secondary to manuscript, found in Matenadaran, no. 8321, was painted by Toros Roslin. Cf. Nersessian, *op. cit.*, pp. 155, 156.

<sup>11</sup> L. Chookaszian, 'Remarks on the Portrait of Prince Levon (MS Erevan 8321)', *Revue des Etudes Armeniennes*, 25 (1994-1995), pp. 299-335

<sup>12</sup> M. Darbinian, E. Korchmazian, *Miniature armenienne. Portrait*. Erevan 1982, p. 32

<sup>13</sup> Chookashian, *op.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

and king Levon I the Great (1199–1219), were famous for using this symbolic connection. The lion appears on almost all coins made in the period of their reign.<sup>15</sup> Lions' heads decorated the royal throne. A cross was frequently placed between two lions on the reverse of coins or there was one lion with a long cross in the background. The lion was the most frequently represented figure on medieval emblems. Apart from French monarchs every dynasty of western Christianity used a lion or leopard in emblems (in the heraldry leopard appears as a type of a lion), at least for a short time.<sup>16</sup> However, before the lion motif found its way to European emblems, it was imported to Europe by means of textiles, mainly from the Near East. Roslin probably treated the lion as a common motif, well known in every nation surrounding Armenia, but he used it in an innovatory way. Even though the lion motif was very popular in Cilicia, we do not have any other representation of the lion in a medallion as a pattern on a textile from this time. What is more, the unknown authors of the other portraits of Levon did not use that symbol either.

The lion is not only a symbol of power, bravery and courage, but also of the resurrected Christ (on the basis of Physiologus – a lion, the father, roaring, wakes up the new-born lion after 3 days from his birth).<sup>17</sup> However, in this case there is no cross next to the lion, as we would see it on coins. Above the lion there is a red disc. On the disc is a gold half-moon, represented in a delicate tone. Close to the medallion's inside contour there are gold points, which in this context - next to the Sun and Moon - may be regarded as stars.

As Chookaszian writes, the lion accompanied by heavenly bodies may allude to god Mithra, a protector of warriors, well known and adored in pagan Armenia.<sup>18</sup> And it is possibly a development of Christ's symbolism, which draws from old patterns and traditions, transforming and conferring them with new Christian meanings.

The composition of the emblem does not repeat any known heraldic composition, so perhaps Roslin, who was an expert in Armenian Christianity as well as in western culture, created the emblem for the future monarch by himself. The emblem makes reference to the symbol on coins of the greatest king from his family – Levon I the Great. He may have wanted to show that like Christ-Lion over all the Heaven and Earth, Prince Levon-Lion will reign legitimately over all Cilicia.

Another miniature shows the portrait of Prince Levon and his wife, Princess Keran. The illustration comes from a Gospel of 1262 (Armenian Patriarchy in Jerusalem, no 2660), ordered by prince Levon himself on the occasion of his wedding, which took place that year. The scene depicts the presentation of Christ in half-figure in the centre. His hands are stretched over the heads of a young couple whom he is blessing. Above are busts (head

---

<sup>15</sup> Lang, *op.cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> M. Pastoureau: *Średniowieczna gra symboli*, Warszawa 2006, pp. 56–65.

<sup>17</sup> D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, Warszawa 2001, p. 278.

<sup>18</sup> A. L. Romaskevich, *Izvajanija i izobrazhenija lvov v Irane (Sculptures and Representations of Lions in Iran)*, in: *III International Congress on Iranian Art and Archeology, Reports*, (Leningrad, September, 1935), Moscow-Leningrad, 1939, p. 212.

to waist) of two angels. The composition is evidently influenced by the art of the Byzantine Empire; emphasizing the divine origin of the authority.

So-called wedding crowns on newlyweds' heads are often represented in Byzantine monuments. Medallions with figures decorate Levon's clothes. Although it is not clearly visible what figures are represented, if one takes fragments into consideration, it might be an emblem with a lion and the sun. Similar ornamentation became a part of the international character of textile decoration, and the fashion of that time. On the other hand, the textile of Keran's dress has a typical eastern pattern – sirens are a widely used motif in Persia and popular in Armenia.<sup>19</sup> It appears that the author of the miniature deliberately combined not only the newlyweds



Fig. 1. Portrait of Prince Levon and his wife Keran, A.D. 1262, Armenian Patriarchate of St. James in Jerusalem, ms. 2660, fol. 228r

but also the East and the West. It is possible that the author or the sponsor wanted to emphasize the harmonious combination of the two cultures in Cilicia.

After this short analysis of the few Roslin's works, it seems that he was not only a great artist but also an eminent intellectual. Although we are able to decipher everything, it is clear that each of his works contains a complicated iconographic program, drawing on the old Armenian traditions, Byzantine influences and western art. Thanks to his talent, creativity and openness to foreign art, Roslin was perfectly able to combine these elements in his works and to form new iconographic types.

Traces of the special role of Cilicia in the history of contacts between the East and the West in the twelfth and thirteenth century can be found in the master's works. Thanks to contacts with crusaders and trade relations, Armenian artists were open to the beauty of European Gothic art, which, starting with Toros Roslin, began to appear in the Cilician art of illumination. Thanks to the combination of Armenian art, deeply rooted in Byzantine

<sup>19</sup> Chookashian, *op. cit.*

art, and Gothic art, Armenian painting reached its crowning phase of development, and also gained its own distinct identity.

The Intensification of Mamelukes' attacks created an atmosphere of threat in Cilicia. It may have influenced the modification of models created by Toros Roslin, which were widely imitated by Cilician artists. In 1280–1300 the slender model of a figure developed by Roslin underwent a clear elongation. The faces gained a sterner and sterner look and the figure's emotions became more and more overdrawn.