

The Hunters on the South Façade of the Church of Płni: Problems of Interpretation

In 1961, Step'an Mnac'akanyan published a categorical critique of Garekin Hovsēp'yan's 1944 study of the church of Płni, in which he re-dated the monument to the seventh, rather than the sixth century. Mnac'akanyan also offered a new identification for the hunting figures depicted on the south façade. Whereas Hovsēp'yan viewed them as donor portraits, the 1961 study interpreted the hunters as ancestral martyrs of the Amatuni family. Noting the lack of iconographical correspondence with traditional donor portraits, and the inscription "Manuēł Amatuneac' Tēr" above the left hand individual, Mnac'akanyan linked this figure with one Manuēł Amatuni mentioned in the *History* of Movsēs Xorenac'i (III 50) executed with his father, Pargew, by the Persians in the fourth century. A number of scholars have voiced agreement with this interpretation, and with the re-dating of the monument. This presentation does not contest the seventh-century date of the monument; indeed further visual evidence may be used to locate the construction of the church sometime between c. 640 and c. 670.

Yet the identification of the princely figures must be reassessed in light of the textual analyses of Movsēs' *History*. Both N. Adontz and R.W. Thomson have suggested that Movsēs himself penned the martyrdom tale: noting that the same account in the *History* of Łazar P'arpec'i does not include any mention of the Amatuni execution, Thomson has suggested that the story was invented by Movsēs. Adontz moreover suggested that Movsēs conceived of the Amatuni punishment in order to explain the family's low ranking in the *Gahnamak* and *Zornamak*. Yet if one accepts Thomson's persuasive arguments for an eighth-century date of Movsēs' account, an identification of the Amatuni martyrs on the seventh-century church of Płni becomes impossible. The textual and visual evidence, thus defined, seem to be irreconcilable: either the reliefs do not depict Manuēł and Pargew Amatuni, the tale recorded in Movsēs' *History* preserves an earlier, and perhaps unwritten, tradition, or the church does not belong to the seventh century. After outlining the historical problems which worry present interpretations of the images, this paper will argue that a closer examination of right hand hunter may yield crucial evidence towards an identification of the scene.