

## Armenian Art and Culture from the Pages of the *Historia Imperii Mediterranei*

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**Abstract** The article studies the editorial series called “Historia Imperii Mediterranei” (HIM) that was directed by Lauro Mainardi, an official of the National Fascist Party, in cooperation with the Armenian Committee of Italy. Between 1939 and 1941, the HIM published a series of booklets entitled *Armenia* that contained not only articles on Armenia but also “essays on Oriental culture”. According to Mainardi, the HIM had a wide cultural interest in art and architecture but also in literature, poetry, philosophy, and politics. The series published two significant essays: the article by Josef Strzygowski, where he innovatively affirmed the role of the East in Christian art and where he employed “Aryan” racial theory; and Giuseppe Frasson’s article, which shows that Strzygowski was recognised as an innovator but, at the same time, that Byzantine studies in Italy were confined to the nationalistic purpose of affirming ‘Italian’ elements in Roman art. In conclusion, the HIM illustrates the political and cultural strategy of the Fascist party with respect to the Caucasian question in addition to its support of the strategy of the Armenian Committee of Italy for protecting Armenians in Italy before the Second World War.

**Summary** 1 The Article of Josef Strzygowski. – 2 Aryan Architecture and Italian Nationalism. – 3 The Sixth Volume: *Armenian Art*. – 4 conclusion.

**Keywords** Historia Imperii Mediterranei (HIM). Armenian architecture. Armenian art. Armenian culture. Italian Fascist culture. Italian artistic historiography. Lauro Mainardi. Josef Strzygowski. Giuseppe Frasson.

There is a lacuna in Italian historiography about Armenian Art. It lacks any specific study, not even a short mention, of the *Historia Imperii Mediterranei* (hereafter called HIM), an editorial series directed by Lauro Mainardi and published in Rome between 1939 and 1941.<sup>1</sup> These essays are indeed mostly unknown to critics, although they are significant for Italian cultural history. To understand the reasons for this silence, it is necessary to take a few steps back in the history of Italy.

In 1915, the *Comitato Armeno d'Italia* (Armenian Committee of Italy) was founded in Milan by former students of the Moorat Raphaël college in Venice who lived in Milan and Turin, and some Armenian traders who worked in the Milan area (Manoukian 2014). This was the first association of the current *Unione Armeni d'Italia* (Union of Armenians of Italy), founded with the purpose to protect the right of Armenians residing and working in Italy. The Italian government officially recognized the *Comitato* in a letter written by Achille Grandi, the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, dated 5 December 1927 (Manoukian 2014, 73-5). In 1938, because of the rapprochement to the National Fascist Party, a

joint Italian-Armenian publishing venture was launched to make Armenian culture more visible in Italy. Lauro Mainardi, an official of the National Fascist Party, director of the *Archivio storico dei movimenti separatisti, irredentisti e revisionisti* (Historical archive of separatist, irredentist and revisionist movements), promoted this venture. He was in charge of seeking and creating alliances with the Caucasian minorities who were still interested in reoccupying the territories that had fell to the Soviet regime (73-6). Mainardi, in agreement with the *Comitato*, proposed to make the problems of Armenia and the Caucasus known to the wider public, in order “to remove some misunderstandings of the Armenian people, spread by malicious people, so that the Armenians, better known and more appreciated by this work of propaganda, can be accepted and received with increasing benevolence from the Italian public opinion” (letter quoted by Manoukian 2014, 77).

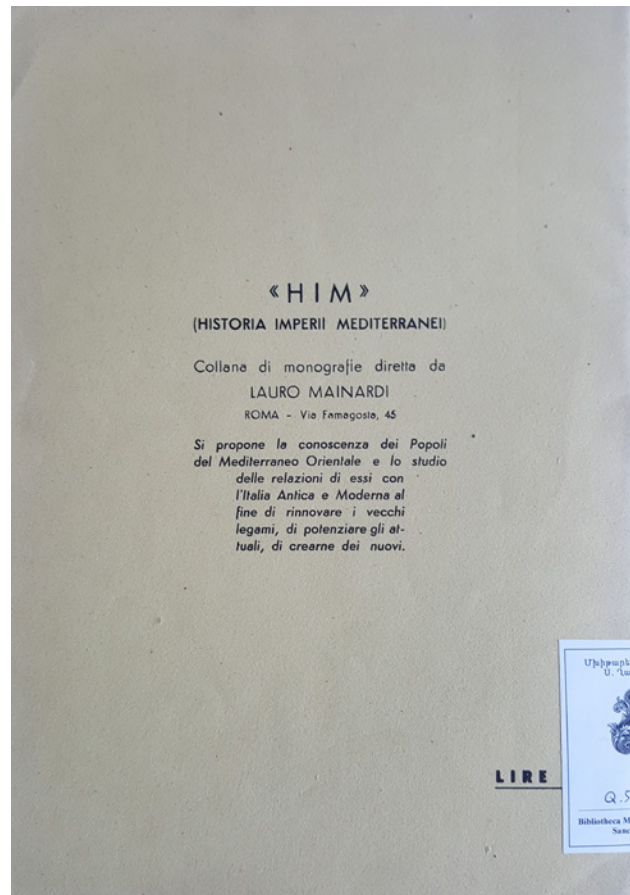
Mainardi’s interest is part of Italian foreign policy initiatives towards the Caucasian region (Mamulia 2007; Manoukian 2014, 77) which, from the end of the First World War, as a re-

1 I am grateful to Lévon Boghos Zékiyan for several generous discussions that inspired my interest in Armenian art.

Figure 1. G. Cartella Gelardi. *Per la grande vittima: l'Armenia!*. Roma: HIM, 1940. Back cover. Photo by the Author

Figure 2. Armenia. *L'Armenia per la sua storia, la sua cultura, la sua posizione geografica, è il ponte naturale tra l'Occidente e l'Oriente*. Roma: HIM, 1, 1939. Cover. Photo by the Author

Figure 3. L. Mainardi. *Erivan contro Mosca*. Roma: HIM, 1941. Book. Photo by the Author



sult of its anti-Soviet perspective and desire to recover the Anatolian region, showed varying attitudes toward the Turkish government, from its support to its total exclusion (Penati 2008).

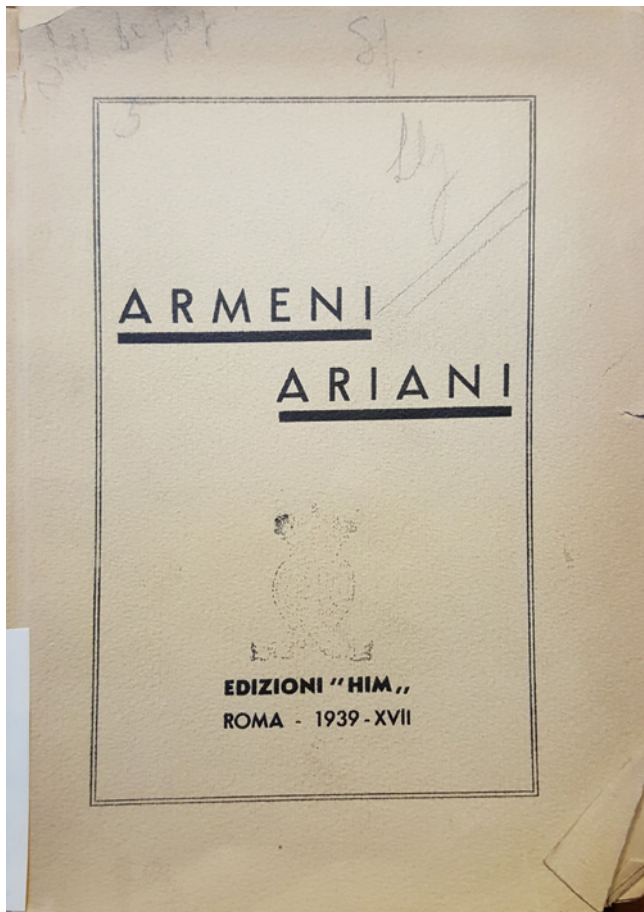
For a better understanding of HIM's birth in the historical context, we must remember that the Armenians, after the race laws were enacted (Law no. 1728, 17 November 1938), remembering their persecutions, tried to be part of the dominant culture in order to escape new misfortunes (Manoukian 2014, 76).

Lauro Mainardi played a part in this strategy. According to his words: "Armenia is a purely-Aryan nation, which, surrounded by people of

different races, fought to defend civilization and Aryanism". Armenia is also considered to be "the one nation that can spread Romanity in the East".<sup>2</sup> Above all, according to Mainardi, Armenia's perspective was similar to the Italian one: it was waiting for the Fascism to win, because Fascism's complete triumph represented the only opportunity to resolve its sad situation. Indeed, just like Italy, Armenia was 'deceived' by the promises of the hegemonic empires [of England and France]" and, "just like Italy after the First World War it was betrayed".<sup>3</sup> Then, Mainardi refers to the Sèvres Treaty (1920), which recognized Armenia's Independence. However, because of the Turkish War

2 "È l'Armenia una purissima Nazione Ariana che, circondata da popoli di razza diversi, ha lottato per millenni per la difesa della civiltà e dell'Arianesimo. Di essa si può dire che è stata, ed è al presente, anche nelle sue strazianti condizioni attuali, la vera propagatrice della Romanità nel prossimo Oriente" (Mainardi 1941, 9).

3 "Ingannata, come l'Italia dalle promesse degli imperi egemonici, come l'Italia determinata a condurre una lotta decisiva e all'ultimo sangue con chi ostacolava le sue legittime aspirazioni irrendentiche, l'Armenia scese a fianco dell'Intesa, lottò con valore leggendario, subì sacrifici enormi e cruentissimi e fu poi, come il nostro Paese, tradita da coloro stessi che avevano sfruttato al massimo grado il suo eroismo e i suoi indicibili martiri" (Mainardi 1941, 9-10).



of Independence, the Treaty of Lausanne replaced the Treaty of Sèvres on 24 July 1923.

Between 1938 and 1940, the *Comitato* financed the publication of a number of essays that differed in importance and quality. Indeed, the acronym of the publisher, HIM, has two possible meanings: it is the name of the *Comitato* expressed in Armenian; in Latin, it alludes to the history of the Mediterranean empire.

Mainardi's aim, in accordance with the Armenian community, was to demonstrate how friendly and similar to Italians Armenians were. The editorial series "aim[ed] to promote knowledge of the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean and to study their relations with ancient and modern Italy, in order to renew old bonds, to strengthen present ones, and to create new ones",<sup>4</sup> as stated in the back cover of each booklet (fig. 1).

The agreements between Mainardi and the

Armenians established that each publication should be sent from Rome to all addresses indicated by the *Comitato*. Mainardi selected and sent the publications to political and cultural authorities, including the Pope, the King, the Duce and also Galeazzo Ciano (Manoukian 2014, 87). This strategy proved very useful after the war started. On 29 August 1939, shortly before the Germans invaded Poland, President Arzumaniyan and Secretary Sarian, on behalf of the *Comitato*, wrote to Mainardi. They requested that "the Armenian citizens of other countries (such as France, Turkey, etc....) be recognized, first of all, as Armenians (whose spiritual loyalty to the cause of Fascism cannot be questioned)" (93). Thus, Mainardi became an essential connection to Rome's authority and power to extend protection to the Armenian people. In 1940, when Italy declared war on France, many Armenians who

4 "Si propone di promuovere la conoscenza dei Popoli del Mediterraneo Orientale e lo studio delle relazioni di essi con l'Italia Antica e Moderna al fine di rinnovare i vecchi legami, di potenziare gli attuali, di crearne dei nuovi".

resided in Italy and possessed a French passport were classified as enemies, subjected to trade restrictions, and even imprisoned. Only the intervention of the *Comitato* and its policy adopted to show friendship between Italy and Armenia succeeded in revoking the measures and persuaded Mussolini to promulgate a decree that freed Armenians from the restrictions (95-100).

Finally, the lack of interest of scholars of art history and architecture in the HIM was due to its strong link with Fascism, which made its contents, from a scientific point of view, too ideologically oriented.

## HIM

Beginning in 1939, the HIM published a series of booklets entitled *Armenia*. During 1939 and 1940, booklets number 1-5 are, according to Mainardi, "essays of Oriental culture". They were first published in *Fronte Unico* and contain articles that are not only on Armenia. Booklets numbers 6-12 are described as "historical-literary essays", each with a different title. Four booklets do not have a number or a link with the HIM, which in the meantime had permanently stopped publishing.

During 1939 and 1940, six other independent booklets were published, three dedicated to poetry, an anthology of literary and historical texts, an essay on the Peace Congress of Paris and an essay on Armenian architecture published by Frasson first in *Pazmaveb*, the journal of the Mechitarist congregation. Finally, three books were published; the last one, *Erivan contro Mosca*, by Mainardi (1941), marks the end of the publishing house's activity.

These are the collected essays and books in chronological order, according also to the list published by Manoukian (2014, 358).

## Essays of Oriental Culture

"Armenia" 1, *Armenia: l'Armenia per la sua storia, la sua cultura, la sua posizione geografica, è il ponte naturale tra l'Occidente e l'Oriente*, estratto da *Fronte Unico*, gennaio 1939 (fig. 2)

"Armenia" 2, estratto da *Fronte Unico*, febbraio-marzo 1939

"Armenia" 3, estratto da *Fronte Unico*, marzo-aprile 1939

"Armenia" 4, estratto da *Fronte Unico*, maggio 1939

"Armenia" 5, estratto da *Fronte Unico*, giugno 1939

## Historical-literary essays

"Armenia" 6, *L'arte armena*, 1939

"Armenia" 7, *Il volto eroico dell'Armenia. Introduzione di Lauro Mainardi*, 1939

"Armenia" 8, *Urfa e l'eroismo armeno*, 1940

"Armenia" 9, [Karniguian, Tacvor], *La dottrina del fascismo e l'espansione ariana in Oriente negli studi di Tazor Karnigouian*, 1940 (introduction by Lauro Mainardi)

"Armenia" 10, *Testimonianze*, aprile 1940

"Armenia" 11, Giuseppe Martucci, *La comunità armena d'Etiopia*, agosto 1940

"Armenia" 12, Jusik Hovrep Achrafian (Viazzi Glauco), *Il periodo post-romantico nella letteratura armeno-occidentale*, settembre 1940

## Independent Booklets

Carducci, Giosuè et al. (1939). *L'Armenia e gli Armeni nella penisola italiana. Raccolta di liriche dedicate al valore ed al martirio del Popolo Armeno*

Achrafian, Jusik Hovrep (1939). *Diciotto liriche armene raccolte e presentate da J. Achrafian*

Cartella Gelardi, Giuseppe (1939). *Nor Arax. Poemetto di Giuseppe Cartella Gelardi*

Frasson, Giuseppe (1939). *L'architettura armena e quella di Bisanzio* (first edition *Pazmaveb*, 1-2, 1939, 234-45)

Cartella Gelardi, Giuseppe (1940). *Per la grande vittima, l'Armenia!*

Gorrini, Giacomo (1940). *Armenia nel congresso della pace a Parigi*

## Books

Schaeder, Hans Heinrich et al. (1939). *Armeni ariani. Studi tradotti dal tedesco da Maria Molteni, prefazione di Carlo Barduzzi*

Mainardi, Lauro (1941). *Un'altra vittima dei franco-inglesi: l'Armenia!*

Mainardi, Lauro (1941). *Erivan contro Mosca* (fig. 3)

This index shows that the HIM had a wider cultural interest involving literature, poetry, philosophy, and politics. The interest on history of art or architecture was not its central focus.

The editorial series begins with a booklet and a book, both miscellaneous, which were published simultaneously in January 1939: *Armeni*

*Ariani and Armenia. L'Armenia per la sua storia, la sua cultura, la sua posizione geografica, è il ponte naturale tra l'Occidente e l'Oriente*, HIM, 1. These essays had a relatively high circulation because they were distributed free of charge to all authorities of the regime in order to underline that Armenians belonged to a friendly area.

*Armeni Ariani* (Aryan Armenians) is a study on the racial characteristics of Armenians, translated from the original German edition published in 1934 by the German-Armenian Society of Berlin, which was dedicated to the memory of the historian and orientalist philologist Josef Markwart (1864-1930). As the "Note" to the Italian translation states: "This work [...] offers a set of conclusive evidence of Armenian people's arianity, which followed the Decree issued on 3 July 1933 by the National Socialist Government". The decree stated that, in order to rearrange careers from the bureaucratic point of view, Armenians should be considered in all respects Aryans. Carlo Barduzzi's preface also contains the same thought: "This documentation undermines the common and false assertion of an absurd racial connection between Armenian people and Jewish people [...]. Thus, the Armenian nation has a pure Aryan origin".<sup>5</sup> Barduzzi, Consul General of His Majesty and professor at the National Center for Political Preparation for Youth (*Console generale di Sua Maestà and Docente al Centro Nazionale di Preparazione Politica per i giovani*), also wrote the *Romanità dell'Armenia* (Barduzzi 1940), which briefly outlined the tormented history of Armenia, which was called the "sentinel of the Roman Empire", in strong contrast with Israel, whose descendants were also away from their homeland.

Johann von Leers, in the essay entitled *Armeni ed Aarii* (Armenians and Aarii) (1939, 17-25),<sup>6</sup> clearly stated that Armenians were Aryan. He

refers specifically to Hans Günther's *The Racial Elements of European History* (1927). According to Günther's school of racial classification, the term 'Aryan' should not be considered a synonym of Nordic (because the Nordic character, also mixed, is only a part of the Armenian one).<sup>7</sup>

After a brief introduction to the origin of the word 'Aryan', from the Aryan people, which indicates its belonging to a pure, non-deviated, strain of Indo-European peoples, he considered the term in relation to struggles against Judaism. He described the conflict between Jews and Christians in racial terms, thus, shifting to the issue of race between Jews and European peoples. Von Leers wrote: "Then, in contrast to the Jews, you must put Germans, Italians, Russians, Polish, like English" (1939, 19), "but what about the Armenian people? Can the term Aryan also include them?" (20) To this question, he replied: "It can be affirmed without any doubt that the Armenian people, by origin, language, and for purely Nordic character [...] is part of the Aryan peoples". Indeed, the tragedy for this people is that "it has been able to preserve its culture and Aryan customs tenaciously in a geopolitical Middle-Earth where Semites, Mongols and Urals met".<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Armenians occupied a Christian outpost, "during the religious battle of the Orient, surrounded everywhere by Islam" (von Leers 1939, 24). Therefore, "it must be enough for defining this population as Aryan that it has not accepted Jewish elements, has no negro blood, and has a blood which is bonded to the clearly recognizable Nordic race. Not only the Armenian people completely satisfies these requirements, but it is also proved that it is part of the European branch of the Aryan family, speaks a Nordic language, and has Nordic characters which are clearly recognizable. Therefore, Armenians are an Aryan people!"<sup>9</sup>

5 "Con tale documentazione viene a cadere l'asserto inventato e comune di una assurda correlazione razziale tra il popolo armeno e il popolo giudeo [...]. La nazione armena è dunque di schietta origine ariana" (Barduzzi 1939, 7).

6 Also published in the first number of the HIM and republished from *Fronte Unico*, 10 January, 1939-XVII, 1.

7 The rise of the Aryan myth in early modern scholarship has been well examined by Leon Poliakov (1971) and Maurice Olender (1989).

8 "Si può affermare indubbiamente che il popolo armeno, per origine, lingua e per il carattere prettamente nordico [...] fa parte dei popoli ariani [...] Esso ha saputo mantenere tenacemente la propria cultura ed i propri costumi ariani, in un territorio geopolitico di transito, ove si incontrarono semiti, mongoli ed urali" (von Leers 1939, 24).

9 "Deve bastare che un popolo non abbia accolto in sé elementi ebraici, non abbia sangue negro e posseda un legame di sangue con la razza nordica, chiaramente riconoscibile, per definirlo ario. Il popolo armeno non si trova solamente in queste condizioni, ma è anche provato che esso rappresenta una parte del ramo europeo della famiglia ariana, parla una lingua ed ancora oggigiorno ha dei caratteri nordici chiaramente riconoscibili. Gli Armeni sono dunque un popolo ariano!" (von Leers 1939, 25).

Johann von Leers was among the earliest members of the Nazi Party, in the Waffen SS in 1938 as a *Sturmbannführer* (staff sergeant/major), professor of History at the University of Jena, and he devoted himself to linguistic studies (Sennholz 2013, Mutti 2015). As one of the most passionate and active anti-Semite upholders of the Third Reich's propaganda, after moving to Berlin in 1933 together with his wife, he became the editor of the *Nordische Welt*, a monthly periodical of the Society for the Prehistory and Germanic Prehistory (*Gesellschaft für germanische Ur- und Vorgeschichte*), directed by Herman Wirth. With Wirth, von Leers established "a theosophical Nordacist circle, which had the purpose, among other things, to revive the ancient Germanic religion, in particular sun worship" (D'Onofrio 1997, 146). In 1938, von Leers was appointed *professore di scambio* (kind of visiting professor) at the University of Rome. Here he joined the editorship of the magazines *La Difesa della Razza* and *La Vita Italiana* and held some public conferences. It is likely that at that time he met Mainardi who asked him to publish in the HIM. Von Leers's short article, published twice in the HIM in slightly different versions, reveals his terrible ideas and his acquaintance with Hans F.K. Günther.

Then, there are four more essays on race (Abeghian 1939, Roth 1939, Klinge 1939, Ewald Stier 1939) and, finally, the article by Josef Strzygowski (1939): *Gli Armeni banditori del pensiero architettonico ariano* (Armenians promoters of Aryan architectural thinking).

## 1 The Article of Josef Strzygowski

Strzygowski, according to his *Orient oder Rome* (1901), researched the prototype of the monument that could explain all further developments of Western medieval art in the East. In his model, Rome was rejected, the Christian spirit was in Orient. In *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* (1918), he went further by aiming to demonstrate the origins of Armenian architecture in the East (Iran) and its resulting influence on the origin of Western architecture.

The article published in the HIM begins with a brief explanation of the Indo-European lan-

guage, conceived not only as 'simple linguistic family' but also as a 'blood unit', as the author stated in *Die Baukunst*. Moreover, in his *The Origin of Christian Church Art* (1924), he suggested that the domed church migrated from Armenia to the West. According to his theory, already in the fourth century, the central-plan martyria of Constantine revealed the influence of early Armenian forms, and, by the sixth century, Armenian influence reached Byzantium (Maranci 1998, 365). But, as Maranci pointed out, by the 1930s Armenia's role in Strzygowski's theory changed. Indeed, he was more interested in the origins of Eastern forms and in a number of works, collected in *Early Church Art in Northern Europe* (1928), and theorized the common origins of 'Indo-German' architecture. Finally, in *Spuren Indogermanischen Glaubens in der Bildenden Kunst* (1936), since he was convinced of the existence of an Aryan architecture, Strzygowski formulated the basic principles of his *Urarchitektur*, and Armenia became an important carrier of Indo-German building tradition. The most important feature of Indo-German architecture is that the ground plan is often surmounted by a dome, a scheme described as *strahlenform* or radiating form, in contrast to the longitudinal basilica. The socio-political context behind Strzygowski's anti-Roman theory became clear when he, after his early moderate years, revealed himself to be explicitly racist and a Nazi sympathizer (Foletti, Lovino 2018, 8). The article published in the HIM corresponds to this last step of his career.

According to Strzygowski, the Armenians, the first people converted to Christianity, built their churches according to the form of the Iranian temple of fire (just like pre-Romanesque buildings in Germany). It was only later that the Church attempted to introduce the basilica as the only acceptable form. But Armenia stuck to pre-Christian architecture. This is why "in the Caucasian territory and in Ararat 'churches' [...] the basilica disappears completely except for few exceptions and later we found a compromise solution, which retains the dome in the middle, despite the elongated shape, the so-called dome-shaped nave".<sup>10</sup>

In his analysis of the form of Armenian churches, Strzygowski, observing that they

<sup>10</sup> "Si rimane sorpresi, trovando nel territorio caucasico e nell'Ararat delle "chiese" che non sono tali secondo le concezioni occidentali, ma sono dei veri monumenti plastici, in forma circolare, ottagonale o quadrata [...] La basilica scompare completamente salvo qualche eccezione [...] più tardi si impone una soluzione di compromesso, la quale mantiene la cupola nel mezzo, malgrado la forma allungata, la cosiddetta navata a cupola" (Strzygowski 1939, 74).

“were circular, octagonal or square-shaped, with a dome”, suggested a constructive purpose called ‘circumambulation’ (circular walking or circular ambulation). Along the Caucasus there is a great deal of evidence for this arrangement, beginning with the Iranian fire temple up to the ancient Slavic temple, which was later taken by the Orthodox church, and to the temple of the Borgund Vikings, which probably derived from naval buildings (Strzygowski 1939, 77). According to Strzygowski, these monuments were remnants of an Ancient Aryan wooden architecture that stretched from India to Norway. Indeed, he dated the tradition of wooden architecture in Europe to before the eleventh century (the first dated stave churches) and believed that it was related to Eastern developments (Maranci 1998, 372). Moreover, by examining circular ambulatories in North Europe and Iran, Strzygowski established an almost-direct link to the choirs in Gothic architecture, which also retain a trace of *strahlenform* (Maranci 1998, 379).

Indo-European scholarship played a fundamental role in Strzygowski’s formulation of Aryan architecture. Along with the rise of racist ideology in contemporary scholarship, his detailed comparative studies gave way to shorter and more polemical works in the 1930s and 1940s (Maranci 2001).

The emphasis on Armenian architecture as Aryan architecture resonates in contemporary Armenian studies in Europe, such as Artashes Abeghian’s *Die Armenische Volksglaube*, which stressed the Aryan character of Armenian language and religion.

Strzygowski’s publication in the HIM was part of a political strategy just like the release of his article in *Amiwtum-Ariertum*, a pamphlet published by the German-Armenian society of Berlin.

The purpose of the German Society and of the Italian *Comitato* was the same, that is, to stress Armenia’s Aryan descent and to strengthen its relationship with Germany and Italy.

## 2 Aryan Architecture and Italian Nationalism

In the first booklet of the HIM: *Armenia. L’Armenia per la sua storia, la sua cultura, la sua posizione geografica, è il ponte naturale tra l’Occidente e l’Oriente*, HIM, 1, 1939, Strzygowski’s article is replaced by a brief, and non-scientific, contribution signed by an unknown S. Djevahir (1939a), *L’architettura armena è ariana* (Armenian architecture is Aryan). Here, theories on race and the method adopted therein, are also applied to art and, in particular, to architecture. Starting from the previous essays that showed that “the Armenian people are one of the oldest Aryan breeds on earth”, Djevahir aimed to examine the issue “from an artistic point of view, considering that in Armenia the most complete expression of art is represented by architecture”. But he approached the question in racialized terms: “Every people has a conception of life and of art that is inherent in its race and its origins”.<sup>11</sup>

So, the theory of race switched, in a way that is at the same time ridiculous and dangerous, to art history and, in particular, to architectural history. Indeed, “Armenians have an artistic conception that agrees with the art of all the Aryan people”. Moreover, “although the Armenians were under the domination of non-Aryan peoples, Armenian art and architecture were not influenced by those rulers. And this is because the non-Aryan aspirations of invaders could not meet the purpose of Armenian art”.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Armenian art remained foreign to Semitic art, and Armenian architecture showed the elements of Aryan architecture. They are:

1. Armenian building’s plan is based on an Aryan conception, as it derives from the Greco-Roman elongated rectangular plane.
2. The Armenian temple is a remake of a Greco-Roman temple in Eastern forms. This temple is the model for Armenian churches and has both the plan and elevation similar to Western buildings.

11 “Ogni popolo ha una concezione della vita e delle arti che è inerente alla sua razza ed alle sue origini” (Djevahir 1939a, 23).

12 “Gli Armeni hanno una concezione artistica che concorda con l’arte di tutti i popoli ariani. E l’architettura armena riflette in tutte le sue estrinsecazioni questa concezione artistica ed a tal punto che nella loro lunga storia, ogni volta che gli Armeni si sono trovati sotto dominazione di popoli non ariani l’arte e l’architettura armena sono restate estranee a quelle dei dominatori. E ciò perché le aspirazioni non ariane degli invasori non potevano soddisfare le tendenze dell’arte armena” (Djevahir 1939a, 23).

3. The Armenian building is well proportioned and its size is quite small, therefore, it is close to the Greco-Roman Aryan building.
4. Armenian architecture developed its own decoration, in which we can see a slight Iranian influence.
5. The dome represents the royal crown, which is the Aryan symbol of domination and authority. (Djevahir 1939a, 23).

In conclusion, Djevahir tried, clumsily, to find a compromise between Strzygowski's 'orientalist' theories and the nationalistic theories of the Regime's ideology. He considered pre-Christian Armenian architecture to be Aryan art, with regards to its plans, proportions, and decoration, which derived from Greco-Roman architecture. After the rise of the Christian Era, Aryan features are emphasized, especially with the introduction of the dome in religious buildings, even if the Armenian dome is perceived as significantly different from Roman features.

Also in 1939, Djevahir wrote a brief contribution on the temple of Garni, contained in volume 6 of *L'arte armena* (The Armenian art) (Djevahir 1939b). Here, Djevahir superficially connected the Armenian temple to the "pure ancient Roman style" and stressed the high level that the Armenians achieved in the elaboration and diffusion of the Roman civilization, according to the Italian nationalistic interpretation of art.

In the same year, Giuseppe Frasson published *L'architettura armena e quella di Bisanzio* (The Architecture of Armenia and of Byzantium), in *Paz-maveb*, soon republished in the HIM by Mainardi.

Frasson, an architectural historian, addressed Armenian architecture in a more reasonable and critical way. He outlined a brief history of research up to Strzygowski, whom he recognizes as an innovator, even though he does not accept all his positions. Frasson placed Armenian architecture within the broader theme of the Origins of Byzantine Art but he is nonetheless still influenced by nationalistic interpretations.

While Strzygowski was expanding his research on the role of the East in Christian art, Byzantine studies in Italy were reduced to nationalistic purposes (Frantova 2018, 94) and the

ideas of the Austrian art historian met large acceptance and strong opposition (Bernabò 2003, 79-83). Massimo Bernabò's research shows that the anti-Byzantine arguments of various Italian nationalists were later regularly published in the pro-fascist newspaper *Il Giornale d'Italia* and in its monthly magazine *La Rivista illustrata del Popolo d'Italia* (Bernabò 2010, 139). In the 1930s, the target of this periodical's political attacks was, among others, Josef Strzygowski (Bernabò 2003, 117-30). Sergio Bettini, at first fascinated by Strzygowski's approach, later established a deep connection with the formalism of the Wien School (Bettini [1942] 2011, Agazzi 2011). At the same time, he seems to be influenced by Mussolini's imperial rhetoric (Bernabò 2003, 167). According to Bettini, vaults and domes are Roman and Christian architecture was born in Rome, not in the East (Bettini 1939; Lemerle 1952). Bettini debated Armenian architecture in his *Architettura Bizantina* (Bettini 1937) and he found similarities, as pointed out by Cartella Gelardi, between "Romanesque and Proto-gothic forms" and the "spiritual harmony", like an expression of a "pure art, like Bach's music" (Cartella Gelardi 1940a, 17).

Frasson's approach also is strongly nationalistic. In his opinion, art is a natural expression of peoples, and therefore "it will affect the soul, the character of its people, and the environment in which they live. Cultural and artistic differences between one people and another are real, and they can have their effect. But later, the national element will revive, perhaps in other forms, and will produce a 'Renaissance'".<sup>13</sup>

He distinguished between creative peoples, with artistic ingenuity (peoples who have their own culture but are inward-looking) and communicative peoples, with political ingenuity (who are able to assimilate and unify, imposing their political power on neighbouring peoples and assimilating their cultures in order to share their achievements with a wider civilization).

The most typical example of the second category is Roman art, which embraces the art of several countries such as Etruria, Greece and the East. Also Byzantine art belongs to communicative peoples. The art of Byzantium is the art of an empire; it is very complex because it combines

<sup>13</sup> "Ad esso subordiniamo inconsciamente la suddivisione che esiste fra i vari popoli e varie civiltà. Ma si deve pensare che ogni popolo, in quanto distinto da un altro, ha anche distinto il suo sviluppo. Così l'arte, che ne è l'espressione naturale, risentirà dell'animo, del carattere delle sue genti e delle condizioni d'ambiente in cui esse vivono. Scambi culturali e artistici fra un popolo ed un altro esistono, e possono avere il loro effetto, ma poi l'elemento nazionale tornerà a risorgere, magari sotto un nuovo aspetto, e si avrà un "Rinascimento" (Frasson 1939a, 234).



Eastern and Western elements, especially in its architecture.

Assuming that the dome is the distinctive element of Byzantine architecture, Frasson wondered if this architectural element could come from Armenia. He analysed all the different types of Armenian architecture and observed that they are almost always domed architectures, both in central and longitudinal-plan buildings, while considering, with Strzygowski, basilica churches to be an exception and as foreign influence.

According to Strzygowski, in the first phase of Armenian church architecture, the simplest type of dome consisted in a dome on a square base, the 'domed square' *Kuppelquadrat*, which he considered to be of oriental origin, deriving from Churasan and Eastern Persia. On the contrary, according to Frasson, this type already existed in Roman art. The second type, called 'domed apsidal square', adds semicircular apses to each side of the central square bay, as in the seventh-century churches of Mastara, Artik, Haritcha, Avan, and St. Hripsime at Vagharshapat.<sup>14</sup> During the seventh century, after the wars against the Parthians (571-91), these buildings show the great flowering of Armenian art, which, for Frasson, represents the rising of the national element.

Another type is the 'plan with four piers'. The most ancient extant example in Armenia is the church of Bagaran, in which four central piers support a tall drum and dome, surrounded by a vaulted, apsidal ambulatory. According to Strzygowski, this plan appeared as early as the fourth century both in Armenia and Iran and this type influenced Western architecture up to the Renaissance. He reported a legend in which Leonardo is said to have been in Armenia, from where this type spread widely. Giuseppe Cartella Gelardi recorded the same legend in *Testimonianze* (Cartella Gelardi 1940b, 45). Frasson, on the contrary, strongly upheld Italian Renaissance's originality and rejected this hypothesis (a legend, in fact).

According to Strzygowski, the central-plan buildings represent in Armenia also a second group of apse-buttressed buildings that evolved from the tetraconch to the hexagon and octagon. Many monuments in Armenia belong to these types but they seem to be late. Frasson, again, rejected Strzygowski's arguments about these types of churches. He rejected the argument that in Armenia there was also the octoconch, which is the model of St. Vitale and SS. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, or the quadriconch, the model of S. Lorenzo of Milan, or the decaconch, the model of the temple of Minerva Medica. Rather, he preferred to consider this kind of architecture to be non-Armenian.

Frasson believed that the issue of the origins of the dome could not be limited to the relation between Armenia and Byzantium but that it was necessary to expand the horizon from the far East to Rome. He gave credit to Strzygowski for expanding the horizon of Christian archeology, previously confined to the Mediterranean, and for creating a new method in comparative art, which involved studying monuments themselves rather than just reading books.

Finally, Frasson defended the nationalistic approach to art history and affirmed Italy's and Italian Renaissance's role in art history. He criticized Strzygowski and his theory, but in doing so, he weakened the theories related to Aryan architecture, which were elaborated in the first volume of HIM. Indeed, while Strzygowski's views were accepted for political reasons because of his Aryan theory on architecture, they were strongly rejected by Italian nationalists and fascists, who wanted to affirm 'Italian' elements in Roman art (Frantova 2018, 93).

If we examine Frasson's article in the context of Italian nationalist art historians and consider Strzygowski as an anti-Italian, it is easier to understand the criticisms of his theory. This approach, both ideological and technical, created a wildly unstable, nearly schizophrenic interpretation in Italian historiography.

14 Strzygowski found the origins for the Mastara type in Iran and Central Asia.

### 3 The Sixth Volume: *Armenian Art*

The sixth volume of HIM, entitled *L'arte armena* (The Armenian Art),<sup>15</sup> is mostly dedicated to music and literature and less to figurative art and architecture. The introduction by Teresio Rovere, a text from the *Storia universale dell'arte*, shows the link between the spirituality of Armenia and Italy, because the two peoples had "constant relations of friendship" (Rovere 1939, 6), in accordance with the 'mission' of the HIM. The text contains several errors, such as its incorrect telling of the history of the bronze horses on the façade of St. Mark's in Venice, which were related, according to Rovere, to an indirect exchange of gifts between Armenia and Venice, more precisely, between Rome and Armenia, and then between Rome and Venice.

Armenian architecture is depicted as a revival of Syriac forms, which were, in turn, oriental elaborations of Roman architecture with Byzantine and Muslim stylistic elements. This architecture, during the seventh century, shows a "strong independent spiritual unity", and during the Bagratid Kingdom enjoyed its Golden Age in the city of Ani, which today is reduced to ruins. Rovere used several quotations from *Armenia. Travels and study*, written by the English businessman and traveller Henry F.B. Lynch (1901). Among these quotations is the description of Ani's cathedral (989-1001), built by Trdat, who later repaired the dome of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Maranci 2003).

The text uses quotations to emphasize topics such as spirituality and the connection with Roman antiquity. On the other hand, the descriptions of Armenian monuments, such as those in the city of Ani, are quotations taken from Lynch's suggestive descriptions. Rovere gave little consideration to sculpture, which he considered "closely connected to the provincial forms

of Byzantine art" and even less to painting. Few notes are dedicated to illuminated books, which he recognized, to be a properly Armenian decorative style that began in the twelfth century and was characterized by Islamic influences.

The introduction ends with brief accounts of artists who lived between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, including some who lived outside Armenian territory, such as Hovhannes Aivastian (1817-1900), known as Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky, Russian Romantic marine painter, and Edgar Chahine (1874-1947), French painter and engraver. In this volume, the only work on architecture is Djevahir's contribution mentioned above.

### 4 Conclusion

To conclude, the short life of the HIM shows the political and cultural strategy of the Fascist party regarding the Caucasian question. The support given to the Armenians was intended to counteract French, English, and Turkish interests in the Caucasus. On the other hand, this position strengthened Russia, another potential enemy. The Armenians, for their part, who were crushed between the still vivid memory of the genocide they escaped and the impending war with its horrors, tried to develop a strategy to protect themselves.

HIM's history, therefore, even if it did not produce scientific results in the field of art history, played a significant role in the cultural history of Italy and its relations with Armenians and their culture, revealing affinities and interests that have been rooted in the historiography well before the wicked period of Fascism, and continue even now.

15 I am grateful to Agop Manoukian for generously providing me with a copy of the booklet.

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