

A Study of the Typologies of Armenian Churches in Iran

Marco Brambilla

Salmast Heritage Association

Abstract Armenian churches in Iran are vital expressions of Armenian cultural heritage, reflecting a presence dating back to the fourth century. Over 400 churches survive, embodying resilience and a synthesis of Byzantine, Persian, Assyrian, and Islamic influences. They range from monumental urban churches with central towers and classical plans to modest rural structures. Originating in northwestern Iran, their architecture evolved significantly during the Safavid era, especially in Isfahan. Later periods allowed greater expression, and a few churches were even built after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, underscoring continuity and identity.

Keywords Armenian churches. Iran. Urban and rural churches. Safavid churches. Elements of Armenian church design. Modern Armenian churches.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Geographical Distribution. – 3 The Heritage of Armenian Architecture in Western Azerbaijan, Iran. – 4 Armenian Churches in Eastern Iranian Azerbaijan. – 5 Central Desert Region: The Armenian Diaspora Under the Safavids. – 6 The Qajar and Early Pahlavi Periods. – 7 Architectural Significance. – 8 The Armenian Churches of the Mid-Twentieth Century (1950-87). – 9 Preservation. – 10 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

According to the Organization for the Protection of National Heritage Sites in Iran, there are approximately 573 churches in Iran, dating from the early centuries of Christianity through the late twentieth century. With a few notable exceptions, these churches are primarily Armenian, reflecting the enduring presence of the Armenian community in the region.¹

A second group of Christian/Nestorian churches is the Assyrian churches, mostly around Lake Urmia, and a small number of Russian, Greek, Catholic, and protestant churches built mostly in the last century in Tehran. A certain number of Missionary churches were also built in Iran in the nineteenth century, but little physical evidence remains.

The typology of Armenian churches in Iran is marked by significant architectural diversity, shaped by factors such as geographical location, historical context, and the availability of building materials. Spanning several centuries, these churches combine traditional Armenian architectural styles with local influences, producing distinct designs that reflect the unique environmental and cultural conditions of different regions. Key architectural features include adaptations to local materials, such as baked and unbaked bricks, underscoring the resilience and adaptability of Armenian culture across its diasporic history.

Historically, Armenian churches in Iran can be categorized into four distinct periods:

¹ The body of Armenian architecture in Iran was not fully known, studied, or acknowledged until the mid-1970s. Of course, the main monasteries of St. Thaddeus and St. Stepanos, as well as the impressive Vank Church in New Julfa/Isfahan, were known and already part of the Iranian cultural heritage sites. Some of the other Armenian monuments, like for example the Armenian church of Shiraz, were also reviewed by a few scholars but were essentially lost to the general public. Since the early 1970s, the interest in discovering and learning more about the minority architectural heritages in Iran has greatly increased, and several research programs were initiated. Among these, particularly prominent was the cooperation program between the National University of Iran, School of Architecture, and the Politecnico of Milan, which jointly initiated a systematic survey and research program of Armenian heritage sites in Iran. Prof. Alpago Novello and Marco Brambilla actively conducted 4 site exploratory missions, and 2 publications were generated by the cooperation of the two universities. Iran I and Iran II, published in 1977 and 1978 remain to date relevant research sources of the Armenian sources in Iran. RAA – *Research on Armenian Architecture*, led by Dr. Armen Haghnazarian, also conducted numerous scientific missions both in Iran and in Turkey and has a large list of publications to their credit. Most importantly, the Iranian government actively maintained and restored Armenian churches and heritage sites. More recently, after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the local authorities funded and invested heavily in the research program of all Armenian cultural sites, significantly increased the Armenian monuments protection program, and continue doing so today.

- 1.1. **Early Medieval Churches (fourth-sixteenth century):** these churches are primarily located in northwestern Iran, encompassing both large-scale structures and smaller village churches.
- 1.2. **Safavid Period (1501-1722):** this period is marked by the construction of Armenian churches mainly in Isfahan and its surrounding rural areas, along with two urban churches in Shiraz and Bushehr.
- 1.3. **Qajar and Early Pahlavi Period (late eighteenth-early twentieth Century):** a resurgence in church building occurred during this period, particularly in emerging towns and major cities.
- 1.4. **Late Pahlavi Period (1950-79):** in this relatively brief but transformative period, Armenian architects began incorporating European influences and modern technologies, reshaping the architectural image of Armenian churches.

2 Geographical Distribution

The architecture of Armenian churches in Iran is significantly shaped by their geographical locations, as well as the historical circumstances surrounding their construction. These churches can be divided into two main regions based on their location and the typology of their architecture.

The first region is Northwest Iran, which in itself is now known as Western and Eastern Iranian Azerbaijan. This is a land that was often part of the Armenian principalities and is closest to the Armenian culture, influences, and design elements.

The second is the area of Central Iran, including the city of Isfahan and extending to the Persian Gulf. This area emerged during the Safavid period in the sixteenth century and later extended to other major cities of Iran, including Tehran.

3 The Heritage of Armenian Architecture in Western Azerbaijan, Iran

3.1 Historical Background

The Northwestern region of Iran, generally referred to as Iranian Azerbaijan, is one of the oldest and most culturally diverse areas in the Middle East (Said Jamal 1977). Numerous archaeological sites in this region testify to the presence of multiple civilizations over millennia. The boundaries and ethnic composition of Azerbaijan have changed over time, but it remains a key cultural heritage site in the region (Karang 1977).

Armenian presence in Azerbaijan is well-documented, dating back to the first millennium BCE when the area was dominated by the Urartu Kingdom (twelfth to sixth centuries BCE), considered the precursor to the Armenian people. Following the fall of Urartu in 590 BCE by the Medes and the subsequent rise of the Median and Achaemenid Empires, the ethnic groups of Urartu gradually merged to form the Armenian nation. Armenians have lived in this region continuously for over two millennia, as part of the historic Vaspurakan region of Armenia (Kroll 2012).

Christianity was adopted by the Armenians in 301 CE, which led to a series of religious conflicts with the Persian Empire. Nevertheless, the Armenian princedoms in the Maku, Salmast, and Khoy regions continued to function as vassals to the Persian king. By the seventh century, following the Arab conquest (Moroni 1986), Armenians continued to maintain their presence, paying tribute to various overlords, including the Arabs, Persians, and local Kurdish and Turkish rulers (Hovhanissian 1977).

Under the Mongol Ilkhanid Empire (1256-1335), Armenians experienced a brief period of prominence and religious freedom (Dashdondog 2011). The Mongols' religious tolerance allowed the renewal of church buildings, of which many remain to this day (Prezbindowski 2012).

In the sixteenth century, the region became a battleground between the Ottoman and Persian Empires, a period that saw the establishment of new Armenian communities in central Iran. The rise of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century further altered the political and territorial landscape, prompting many Armenians to relocate to urban areas (McCabe 1999).

The twentieth century saw significant political shifts under the Pahlavi regime, which further shaped the lives and culture of the Armenian diaspora in Iran. However, despite the long history of Armenian presence in the area, the number of extant medieval Armenian architectural monuments is relatively limited (Iskandaryan 2019).

3.2 Notable Armenian Monuments in Western Azerbaijan, Iran

The two most prominent examples of Armenian architecture in this region are the St. Thaddeus Monastery near Maku [fig. 1], (Kleiss, Seihoun 1971) and the St. Stepanos Monastery on the southern bank of the Aras River [fig. 2] (Hofrichter, Uluhogian 1980). These monasteries, registered as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, are both important pilgrimage sites and considered major architectural landmarks of the Armenian diaspora in Iran. These two structures are the most closely related historical landmarks to the traditional medieval Armenian architectural language. Both monasteries were

rebuilt and added on several times during the centuries, but they still reflect the central floor plan with a high dome, similar to that of the church of Edjmiastin.

The building material and the technique of construction are typical of Armenian architecture. Cut and elaborate ashlar stone is used in a multi-color pattern. The outer and inner surfaces of walls are smooth ashlar stone, while the inner core of the wall is reinforced with rubble stone and mortar.

The Monastery of St. Tadeus has two prominent domes and a bell tower, and a typical altar element, consisting of three arches.

The Monastery of St. Stepanos, which also has several additions and a secondary church next to the main church hall, is best known for its impressive and highly decorated dome and the bell tower.

Both monasteries are surrounded by high defensive walls and include cells and other facilities for the resident monks.

They are decorated with typical Armenian frescoes and bas-reliefs, which are common elements in medieval Armenian architecture.

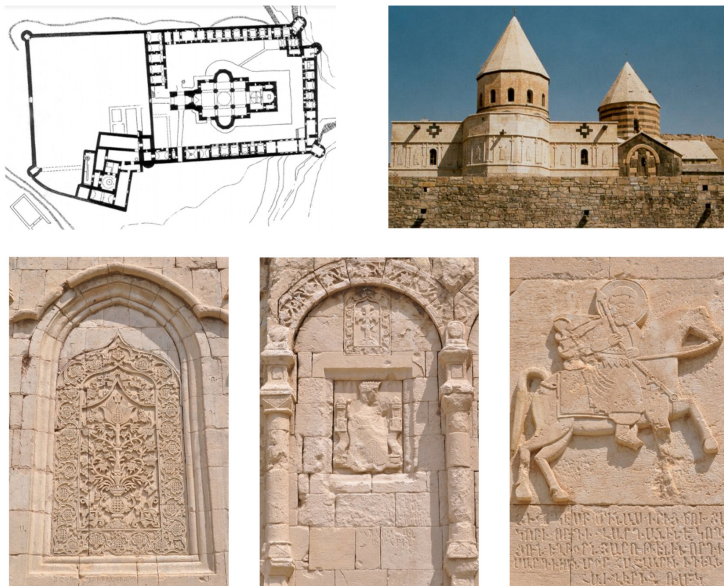


Figure 1 Author, St. Thaddeus Monastery: architectural plan, exterior view, and details of carved stone decoration. n.d. Photographs and drawing. Maku, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 2 Author, St. Stepanos Monastery: architectural drawing, bird's eye view, dome exterior, and interior frescoes and decoration. n.d. Photographs and drawing. Jolfa, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

On a smaller scale, but equally significant, is the St. Sargis Church in Khoy (fourth-seventeenth century) (Sistani 2008), which has a long, rectangular exterior with three naves and a shallow dome resting over four massive stone pillars in its center. The majority of the roof and dome areas of the church is in baked brick, possibly a restoration

of a later period. One of its most interesting features is an altar piece, similar to that of the monastery of St. Tadeus with 3 arched openings.

The Monastery of Derik (Surb Astvatsatsin), built in masonry in the fourteenth century, was a famous monastery and well known for its scriptorium [fig. 3].

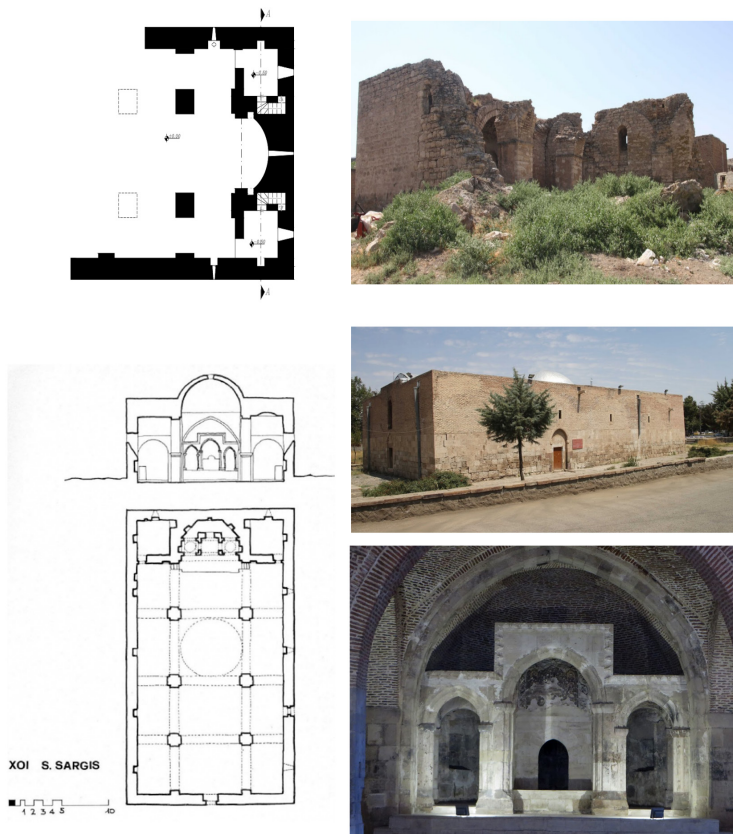


Figure 3 RAA Archive, Upper: Monastery of Derik (plan and exterior of collapsed remains); Lower: St. Sargis Church (plan, section, and exterior/interior views). n.d. Photographs and drawings. Salmast and Khoy, Iran. RAA Archive, copyright

Other notable sites include the Church of the Shepherd [fig. 4] (sixteenth century) on the southern bank of the Aras River, which is a small chapel over a cruciform plan with a conical dome over a high drum (Alpago Novello, Brambilla 1977). It has been recently totally rebuilt with irregular ashlar stone, and the Holy Mother of God Chapel in Dzor-Dzor (ninth-fourteenth century) [fig. 5], which was relocated from its original location to higher grounds in 1987-88 to avoid flooding

due to a proposed dam on the Zangmar River. The church has a small footprint, barely 35 square meters, but is 12 meters tall, creating a very vertical image of a chapel (Arakelian 2000).

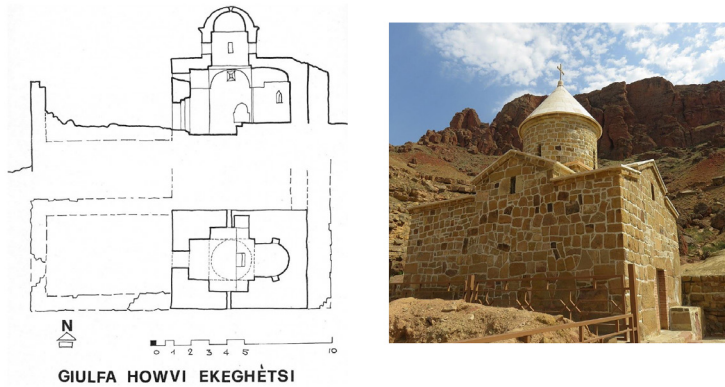


Figure 4 Author, Church of the Shepherd: architectural section, plan, exterior view, interior dome, and altar. n.d. Photographs and drawings. Jolfa, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 5 SHA Archive, Holy Mother of God Chapel in Dzor-Dzor: exterior view and detail of the dome. n.d. Photographs. Maku, Iran. RAA Archive, copyright

The St. Mary's Church in Darashamb, Surb Astvatsatsin (is probably dated from the fourteenth century) [fig. 6] and is also located in the region, near the Aras River (Alpago Novello, Brambilla 1978). The church has a classical Armenian floor plan with three naves and a central dome resting over 4 pillars with arches. The dome itself is low and has an unusual drum type, which may be due to restorations or rebuildings of later periods.

Although limited in number, these churches are the primary examples of Armenian medieval architecture in Iran. Most of these churches, constructed with ashlar stone and featuring traditional domes on elongated drums, have undergone extensive rebuilding, repairs, and additions over the centuries due to natural or man-made disasters.



Figure 6 Author, St. Mary's Church in Darashamb: floor plan, exterior view, interior of altar, and fresco. n.d. Photographs and drawing. Jolfa, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

3.3 Rural Churches of Western Azerbaijan, Iran

Salmas, known as Salmast in Armenian, located north of Lake Urmia, halfway between Tabriz and Eastern Turkey, has been a focal point for the Armenian Christian community since ancient times, with its religious significance particularly highlighted during the early medieval period. It is important to mention that Salmas is only one of the sub-regions of Western Iranian Azerbaijan. Other regions, like Khoy, Urmia, Maku and others were also historical sites of millennia-old Armenian presence. Despite experiencing periods of destruction and conflict, such as the Battle of Salmas in 1429 and the impacts of the Russo-Persian War, the Armenian presence has persisted, contributing to a rich tapestry of historical narratives. The architectural remnants of the churches, with features like multi-nave layouts and intricate iconography, serve as testaments to the community's enduring spirit and cultural identity amidst the socio-political turbulence of the region (Shahinian 2021).

In the rural areas of northwestern Iran, particularly around Salmast and the northern shores of Lake Urmia, over 100 smaller Armenian churches can be found, dating from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. These churches, constructed from local materials such as brick, mud brick and wood reflect the traditional typology of Armenian architecture but are generally less ornate than their urban counterparts (Chiftjian 2017).

The churches display a variety of floor plans, from the simple single room configuration to multi-nave basilica floor plans, of which some may have a central dome. The building materials are often rubble stone, brick or wood, and mostly have flat wooden roofs supported by wooden interior posts (Karapetian 2019).

The churches typically feature a multi-nave layout. This design incorporates wide arches and a distinctive wooden-beam, earth-covered roof, which are common in Armenian rural ecclesiastical architecture. The interiors often include a women's gallery, also known as the *last* congregation area.

Often, these churches do not reflect in their exterior the image of a Christian building, and many of the typical Armenian church elements are incorporated within the four simple walls of the exterior [fig. 7]. A good example for this is the church of Fanai with its complicated arch systems in the interior, enclosed within its plain exterior walls.

The architectural features of these churches reveal a blend of local influences and traditional Armenian styles.

The design elements, combined with specific iconographic representations, illustrate the unique cultural adaptations of the Armenian community within the Iranian context. For example, the artwork often portrays saints and martyrs, visually narrating the collective memory of the Armenian people.



Figure 7 Author, Typology of churches with plain exteriors incorporated within four simple walls: architectural plan and photo of remains. n.d. Photograph and drawing. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

A notable exception is the church of Surb Astvatsatsin in Nakhichevan tepe, which has a Hazarashen-type dome, typical of historic Armenian houses. This type of construction allowed the building of a cupola with a central vent by using smaller segments of wood, hence its name, the thousand-layered roof [fig. 8].



Figure 8 SHA Archive, Surb Astvatsatsin in Nakhichevan tepe: floor plan, exterior view, and three interior views. n.d. Photograph and drawing. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

The churches of Northwest Iran also present a particular uniqueness. In fact, the entire region was historically more connected to the lands of Western Armenia – Today Eastern Turkey – than to what is

considered the heart of Armenia, in and around Yerevan and the Holy See of Etchmiadzin (Bournoutian 1994).²

4 Armenian Churches in Eastern Iranian Azerbaijan

This is the area north-east of Tabriz extending to the southern border of the area known as Nagorno-Karabakh. These churches exhibit architectural similarities with the medieval churches of the broader Karabakh region. Two prominent examples of the area are the churches of Surp Hripsime in Mujumbar [fig. 9] and Surp Hovhannes Church in Sohrul [fig. 10].

The church of S. Hripsime of Mujumbar in Rudqat Rural District/Sjabetar region is northeast of the city of Tabriz and dates originally to the thirteenth century but was rebuilt in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Alpago Novello, Brambilla 1977). Its floor plan is a three-nave building with a central dome that is almost invisible in a rectangular building. It has a pitched roof and a small opening.

Its typology is closely related to medieval churches of the Karabakh region, like for example the white church of Hadrut of the fourteenth century and the Holy Resurrection of the same city of 1621.

The church of Surb Hovhannes in Sohrul, in the same district, is in fact a later construction dating from 1840 during the Qajar period (Alpago Novello 1988). It is said that it was originally built in the fifth and sixth centuries, but we are not able to verify this. As an Armenian church, it is quite unusual as it reflects a unique architectural image. It is constructed in brick and features three towers, over a flat roof with an interior dome construction that is very close to the Islamic architecture of the period. The building consists of 3 main areas, the narthex that is covered with a very tall tower, the central part with a dome over muqarnas-type ceiling, and the altar area, also with its own, smaller, dome. This is also atypical of the Armenian

2 Taxes from the area were often paid to the Throne in Istanbul and not to the Persian kings. Often the governor of Van was essentially the governor of the Salmast region and the commander in chief of all the Ottoman armies that made advances into the region. Often Salmast was paying tribute to the governor of Akhlat. People in Salmast spoke and understood not only Turkish but also Arabic. Even in the early twentieth century, Ottomans occupied a considerable portion of the region. They owned the city and the area of Derick and from there they were installing a telegraph line to the area of Charigh, also owned by the Ottomans. But the region of Salmast was not only closely related to the Ottoman powers dominating the Eastern Armenian lands on a political or financial level, The churches of Salmast were subjects of the Monastery of St. Bartholomew, today in Eastern Turkey, and were paying their taxes to this monastery and not to the Holy See of Ejmiatsin, an issue that was always a point of contention between the Holy See of Ejmiatsin and the Monastery of St. Bartholomew.

architectural style, and the only similar structures were found in the Nakhijevan region, now totally destroyed by the local government.

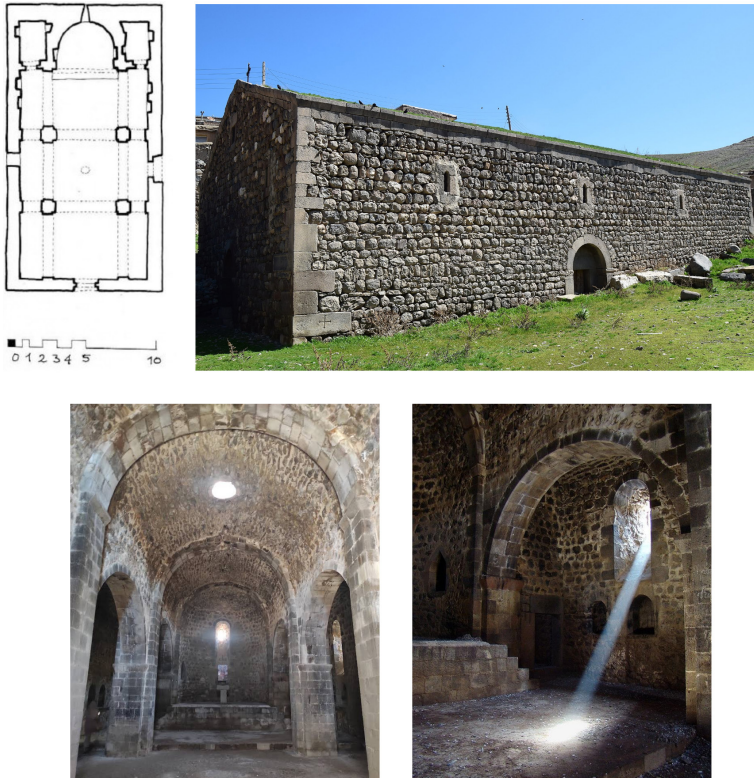


Figure 9 Author, Surp Hripsime Church in Mujumbar: floor plan, exterior view, and interior photos. n.d. Photographs and drawing. Mujumbar, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 10 Author, Surb Hovhannes Church in Sohrul: floor plan, exterior views, close-up of elevation and dome, and interior dome view. n.d. Photographs and drawing. Sohrul, Iran. RAA Archive, copyright

5 Central Desert Region: The Armenian Diaspora Under the Safavids

5.1 Historical background

The rise of Shah Abbas I (1571-1629) coincided with a marked escalation in the Persian-Ottoman conflicts.

At the outset of his reign, Shah Abbas I recognized that Iran, both militarily and financially, was ill-equipped to counter the Ottoman threat. This realization prompted several critical decisions, particularly those affecting the Armenian population. One of his most significant moves was relocating the Safavid capital from Tabriz, located in northwestern Iran, to Isfahan in the heart of the country, far from the Ottoman border. Shah Abbas also sought to unify the country by establishing Shi'a Islam as the official state religion,

and he implemented extensive programs to boost Iranian exports, significantly improving the local economy.³

Among his other policies, Shah Abbas I notably relocated established Armenian communities, particularly the influential Old Julfa merchants, from southern Armenia and northern Iran to Isfahan and its surroundings (Herzig 1991).

The growth of the Armenian community in Safavid Iran, especially in Isfahan, can be understood through three distinct groups (Babaie 2004):

- 5.1.1. **Converted Armenians:** these individuals, along with Georgians and Circassians, converted to Islam and occupied prominent military and administrative roles within the Safavid government. Notably, in 1604, 20,000 Armenians, and in 1616, 130,000 Georgians, were converted and integrated into the Gholam-e-Khasse system – privileged slaves directly loyal to the Shah.
- 5.1.2. **The Mass Deportees:** between 400,000 and 500,000 Armenians were forcibly relocated to Iran from various Armenian regions. These Armenians were settled in several cities across Iran, and were primarily artisans, craftsmen, and peasants.
- 5.1.3. **The Old Julfa Merchant Elite:** a smaller, elite group of Armenian merchants from Old Julfa, who were also forced to leave their city, played a significant role in the creation of New Julfa, an Armenian cultural center in Central Iran. The architectural legacy of Safavid Armenia in Iran, particularly in Isfahan, is

3 The creation of a new Armenian settlement in Central Iran, particularly the city of New Julfa, is often misunderstood or oversimplified in historical accounts. In recent decades, however, scholarly research on the New Julfa Armenians has provided a deeper understanding of the importance of Armenians in their new host country. Studies have shed light on the pivotal role played by the Armenian silk merchants of New Julfa, offering a more nuanced view of their influence in Safavid Iran. In particular, works by Edmund Herzig, Sussan Babaie, Amy Landau, Ina Baghdianzt-McCabe and others have brought to light many aspects of the life and impact of the Armenian minority in Safavid Iran. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Armenians were subjected to both voluntary and forced migrations, largely due to the ongoing conflicts between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. These two regional superpowers fought for control of Armenian territories during the period from 1578 to 1639. Depending on the shifting tides of war, Armenians were deported by the Ottomans to Istanbul and, by the Safavids, to Iran. The Safavid deportations occurred over nearly a century, from 1530 to 1633, with Shah Tahmasb initiating the process, which was then expanded by Shah Abbas. A notable distinction between Shah Tahmasb's and Shah Abbas's policies lies in their approach to religious conversion. Shah Tahmasb focused almost exclusively on the forced Islamization of Armenians, whereas Shah Abbas, particularly among the higher classes, offered Armenians unprecedented religious and political freedoms. The most significant wave of forced deportations occurred in 1604, when large numbers of Armenians were forcibly relocated to Iran. It is estimated that 500,000 Armenians, Georgians, and Circassians were forced to move to Iran.

owed to these wealthy merchants, whose patronage led to the construction of some of the most striking Armenian churches in the world.

5.2 The Armenian Churches of the Safavid Period

Armenian churches built during the Safavid period can be divided into two distinct categories: the majestic churches of New Julfa and the humbler rural churches around the city of Isfahan [fig. 11].



Figure 11 SHA Archive, Diagrams showing the phases of growth of the Armenian quarters in New Julfa. n.d. Diagrams. Isfahan, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

5.2.1 The Churches of New Julfa

These churches were constructed by the Armenian merchant elite and were intended to be monumental, showcasing wealth and prestige (Creswell 1968). The architecture of these churches reflects the affluence and influence of a minority of the elite Armenian community

in Safavid Iran, blending traditional Armenian elements with the architectural design elements of Safavid Iran and decorations that were influenced by European frescoes.

Originally there were 6 Armenian churches in the old city of Isfahan and 24 churches in New Julfa. Today only 13 of these survive, and this article will mention only a few, as the subject is well documented in various publications (Haghnazarian, Mehrabian 1991).

Today, they stand as significant historical landmarks that not only fulfill religious functions but also serve as symbols of the Armenian diaspora's resilience and adaptability in the face of socio-political changes. Among the most notable of these churches is the Vank Cathedral, or Holy Savior Cathedral, celebrated for its elaborate frescoes and architectural fusion of Islamic, Armenian, and European styles.

This cathedral, along with others like Saint Mary Church and the Church of St. Bethlehem, showcases the artistic and cultural contributions of Armenians to Isfahan, making the area a pivotal center for Armenian heritage.

Armenian churches in Isfahan are characterized by distinct architectural elements that reflect a blend of traditional Armenian styles and influences from Persian architecture, particularly during the Safavid period. A defining feature of these churches is the prevalence of the dome, which became a hallmark of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture by the end of the sixteenth century in Iran.

All of the New Julfa churches have prominent, often double domes identical to the domes of other Safavid buildings in the region. The domes and the exterior finishes of these churches have no similarity with any of the classical medieval Armenian churches and stand on their own as an expression of a new Armenian ecclesiastical building.

Brick and mud cover is used extensively, and they blend within the Islamic urbanity of the city extremely well.

As to the interiors, this is almost a revolution within the church building tradition of Armenians. While many Armenian churches were adorned with interior frescos there is no parallel to the excessive, really a European or Byzantine style, treatment of the interior spaces (Tajarian, Gasparyan 2025). These reflect stories from the bible and the creation and are well executed by master craftsmen and heavily adorned with gold and vibrant colors. Gilded decorations, vibrant red, blue and green colors dominate the interior space narrating several stories of the bible and the creation. These decorations, while Christian in concept, are essentially very close to the lavish painting of the interiors of the Safavid palaces. In addition to the interior frescos there is also extensive use of decorative tiles, yet another favored decorative material of Safavid architecture.

5.2.1.1 Vank Cathedral

Vank Cathedral [fig. 12], located in the New Julfa district, was established in 1606 during the reign of Shah Abbas I. The cathedral was completed in 1664, with significant design enhancements made by Archbishop David. The name 'Vank' derives from the Armenian word for 'monastery', and the church is celebrated for its stunning interior, which has made it a popular tourist destination in Isfahan.



Figure 12 Author, Vank Cathedral: floor plan, exterior view, and interior views of the altar and dome decoration. n.d. Photographs and drawing. New Julfa, Isfahan. SHA Archive, copyright

The church is rectangular in its exterior over a cruciform plan with a dominant double shell dome.

It is enclosed within a courtyard with cells and other facilities for the monks. Today it also has an impressive library and museum. A bell tower was added to the building and the exterior architecture of the building is purely Safavide both as it relates to design elements, construction materials and techniques.

The big surprise to the visitor is its interior, which is totally covered with lavish and gilded decorations.

5.2.1.2 Church of St. Bethlehem

Another notable church is the Church of St. Bethlehem, which is equally rich in artistry and history [fig. 13].

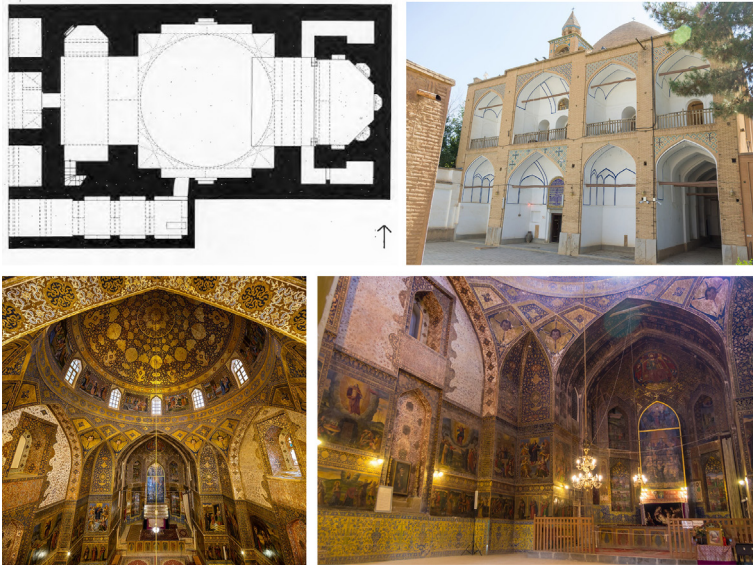


Figure 13 Author, Church of St. Bethlehem: floor plan, exterior view, interior dome, and interior altar. n.d. Photographs and drawing. New Julfa, Isfahan. SHA Archive, copyright

It is built in an enclosed structure but has a significant central plan with a large-scale double shell dome emerging over its arched columns. It has two-storey exterior patios and is also enclosed within a courtyard. Its interior is dominated by its massive dome and the high-quality interior decorations. Stories from the creation are depicted in gilded and vibrant colors and it is certainly a masterpiece of Armenian Safavid architecture.

5.2.1.3 Saint Mary Church

Saint Mary Church, commissioned by Armenian silk merchant Khajeh Avedik Babakian, was completed in 1613. Although smaller than other churches in the district, it is distinguished by exquisite frescoes and opulent chandeliers made of gold and silver. Notably, some paintings were created in Venice and donated by Armenian merchants, illustrating the transnational connections of the Armenian diaspora.

The church is characterized by its open portico on its exterior and smaller dome over a rectangular plan.

Other notable churches of New Julfa are the church of St. George of 1611, built with a central plan over a basilica-type design, the church of St. Nicolas of 1613 with a large-scale dome over a central floor plan. Interestingly, the dome in this case is low profile and less similar to the Safavid domes with large-scale openings at the base of the dome, somehow similar to the church of St. Stepanos of 1614, St. Minas and Surb Nerses of 1666.

An interesting example of Armenian churches in New Julfa remains the Catholic Church of the Lady of the Rosary [fig. 14], which was initiated by Italian Dominicans in 1657 with the help of Armenian Catholics. It was completed in 1681 and then enlarged in 1705.



Figure 14 RAA Archive, Catholic Church of the Lady of the Rosary: floor plan, exterior view, side chapel decoration, and view under the dome. n.d. Photographs and drawing. New Julfa, Isfahan. RAA Archive, copyright

It also has a basilica floor plan with a dominant central dome and an exterior gallery. Its interior was also decorated but by far not to the level of excess and lavishness of the other Armenian churches of Isfahan.

Outside Isfahan, there are only two important urban Safavid era Armenian churches. The church of St. Mary's in Shiraz and the church of Surp Gevork in Bushehr, which was destroyed and totally rebuilt in 1819.

The church of Shiraz is a typical example of a non-offensive recreation of an Armenian ecclesiastical structure within a densely populated Shia community [fig. 15].



Figure 15 Author, St. Mary's Church in Shiraz: exterior view and interior ceiling and wall decoration. n.d. Photographs. Shiraz, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

Located in the vicinity of a major Shia shrine, from the outside, the church is simple, rectangular, and with no particular features.

Inside, a half dome under the flat roof is simulating the dome or the altar of traditional Armenian church buildings, and it is lavishly decorated in a Safavid design with vibrant colors, carvings and refinishings.

5.2.2 Rural Churches of Central Iran

In contrast to the exquisite and prominent urban churches of New Julfa, the rural churches built by Armenians in the villages surrounding Isfahan were more utilitarian, designed for local worshippers. These churches were modest compared to their counterparts in New Julfa, reflecting the simpler lives of the rural Armenians who built them.

The majority of Armenians who forcefully emigrated to Central Iran were not the elite silk merchants of New Julfa. There were simple folks, peasants, artisans and craftsmen. They did not reside in Isfahan or in New Julfa, but populated mainly two adjacent regions of Isfahan: Faridan and Charmahal Bakhtiari. In these arid environments, the Armenians endured, created churches and schools, and maintained the spirit of the Armenian culture.

The real number of the churches in the area is unknown as many have perished over time, but it is still assumed that over 200 rural churches existed in these regions. The structures were mostly simple, with a plan of a single nave or basilica type. Often, the churches did not have a dome or a bell tower, as this would be too obvious and maybe offensive to the local population. A particularly interesting church in this area is the church of Hezarjarib, which was built in 1666 but was heavily damaged during the Afghan invasion and it was subsequently rebuilt in 1790. It has a three-nave floor plan with a central dome and a polygonal fully enclosed apse [fig. 16].

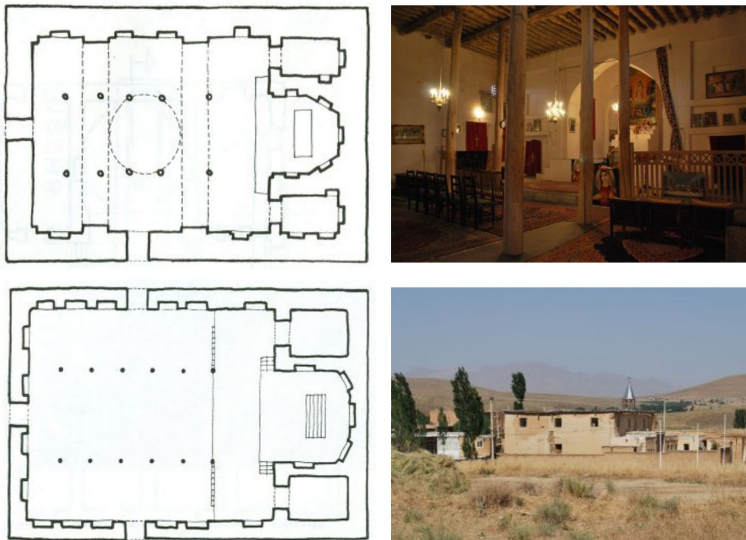


Figure 16 Author, Church of Hezarjarib: architectural floor plans and interior/exterior photographs. n.d. Photographs and drawings. Faridan, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

6 The Qajar and Early Pahlavi Periods

6.1 Historical Background

Following the fall of the Safavid Empire and a prolonged period of internal conflict, the Qajar dynasty gradually consolidated power, bringing stability to the Iranian territories.

The Qajar rulers recognized the importance of the Armenian-Iranian diaspora and provided them certain freedoms, contributing to the establishment of Armenian churches and cultural institutions. These developments fostered a vibrant Armenian identity within Iran, characterized by a blend of their unique style of Armenian churches of the period.

6.2 Architectural Characteristics

The churches of this period tend to use many Iranian architectural motifs and shyly start incorporating historical Armenian architectural motifs. For example, the walls are all consistent with the construction styles of the time in Iran, including pointed blind arches built in brick. If there are domes or towers, these are more modest in size and dimensions and certainly not overpowering.

The mutual influence between Armenians and Iranians continued throughout the Qajar era, where the Armenians played a crucial role in the modernization of Iran.

6.3 Urban Development and Armenian Presence

During this time, many Armenians moved from rural areas to urban centers, particularly Isfahan, Tabriz and Tehran, where they became more integrated into urban life. The increasing urbanization of the Armenian population, along with greater educational opportunities, led to the rise of an influential Armenian presence in Iranian cities.

The establishment of the Pahlavi regime in the early twentieth century further advanced religious freedom for Armenians, which was reflected in the architectural development of Armenian churches. During this period, Armenian architects began to reinterpret traditional Armenian architectural forms within the context of modern Iranian styles, creating buildings that were both distinctly Armenian and locally adapted.

7 Architectural Significance

7.1 Design Features

Armenian churches in Iran during the Qajar period exhibit a distinctive blend of traditional Armenian architectural styles and influences from the Safavid era. These structures often reflect a Basilica style, characterized by an *eyvan*, a chapel, and an altar. Notably, the interior of these churches frequently features a “Bell Tower” under an octagonal dome, which is connected to a two-storey *eyvan* on the southern wall. The interior of this dome is adorned with intricate freezes showcasing motifs, patterns, and vivid depictions of religious figures such as the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus.

7.2 Construction Materials and Transitional Examples

In terms of construction, Armenian churches utilize locally sourced materials, such as brick, which is integral to their structural integrity.

The architecture of these Armenian churches reflects a transition period, bridging the styles found in earlier Armenian churches in Isfahan and those emerging in Tehran.

For example the church of St. Thaddeus and Bartholomew, built in 1768 in Tehran, is still timid in its architectural imagery. It is a simple rectangular building with a small dome and the exterior of the building is compatible with other buildings of the area, with brick and pointed arches.

In contrast, the church of St. George built only a few years later in Tehran in 1795, has prominent conical domes and an impressive bell tower in front of the church.

This tendency continues in Iran as more freedom is granted to the Armenians. For example, the church of S. Sarkis, in Tabriz [fig. 17], built between 1782 and 1821, proudly reflects the image of an Armenian church with a prominent narthex and a high conical dome.



Figure 17 Author, S. Sarkis Church in Tabriz: floor plan, side exterior, bird's eye view, and exterior of the dome. n.d. Photographs and drawing. Tabriz, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

8 The Armenian Churches of the Mid-Twentieth Century (1950-87)

8.1 Historical Background

By the mid-twentieth century, especially following the abdication of Reza Shah and the ascension of Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran experienced an economic and cultural renaissance. Armenians in Iran benefited from this period of renewal, with many now residing in urban areas. This marked a shift in the focus of Armenian church construction. For the first time in centuries, an Armenian church in Tehran – St. Mary's Cathedral – was built in the traditional Armenian style, reflecting the architectural forms of medieval Armenian churches. Designed by a Russian architect, the church stood as a symbol of cultural continuity and a return to Armenian architectural roots. This church did not blend local and Armenian construction traditions. It presents itself as purely an Armenian church.

8.2 Architectural Evolution

This period also saw Armenian-Iranian architects embark on creating a new interpretation of Armenian architecture, blending modern techniques

with traditional forms and local materials. These churches represent a fusion of artistic freedom and architectural innovation, reflecting the dynamic cultural environment of mid-twentieth-century Iran.

The architectural styles of twentieth-century modern Armenian churches in Iran reflect a unique synthesis of traditional Armenian design principles and the influences of various architectural movements, particularly during the Qajar and Pahlavi periods. This period marked increased interactions between Iran and Europe, which led to the incorporation of elements from European modern architecture into Armenian ecclesiastical structures.

8.3 Notable Examples

The churches of the late Pahlavi period fall into two distinct categories. Those that tried to emulate Armenian architecture, either copying them in toto, or those that tried to reinterpret and incorporate some of the better-known Armenian architectural motifs in the new structures [fig. 18].



Figure 18 SHA Archive, Exterior photographs of four different contemporary Armenian churches. n.d. Photographs. Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

The other group consists of just a few examples of Armenian architects who had the courage to reinvent Armenian architecture in light of the new architectural evolution and technology.

While the first group is architecturally not relevant, two modern Armenian churches are worth mentioning in particular, the church of S. Sargis and the chapel of the Holy Cross.

After many years of creating an architecture that was a fusion between Armenian and Iranian techniques and construction methods, the first Armenian church in Iran that was built totally within the classical medieval Armenian image is the church of St. Mary's in Tehran build by the Russian architects Nicolai Lauri and then Nicolai Markoff between 1938 and 1945. This has a classical Armenian church floor plan and its exterior is a reflection of medieval Armenian architecture.

Other churches, like S. Karapet, Abadan 1954, simply copied an Armenian church, while others, like the churches of Surb Grigor Lusavorich in Majidiyeh 1982. This monument attempts to introduce new architectural elements within the context of an Armenian church. On the other hand, S. Anthony, Haykashen, Mazandaran, 1974, is essentially an Armenian dome, cut and installed at ground level and highlighted with ludicrous colors.

Two Armenian churches of the modern era are particularly important to mention: the Cathedral of S. Sarkis and the small chapel of Holy Cross.

8.3.1 Saint Sarkis Cathedral

Saint Sarkis Cathedral is the largest church in Tehran and serves as a significant spiritual and historical center for the Armenian community [fig. 19]. Built in the years 1974-77, it is a single nave building with a central dome. Its dimensions are about 36 x 17 meters and is emphasized by its height and verticality. It functions as the headquarters of the Armenian Diocese in Tehran. The cathedral is notable for its architectural beauty and serene atmosphere, attracting both pilgrims and visitors alike.

It was primarily designed by noted Armenian architect Eugene Aftandelian and while its front facade is classical in concept and consists of the central facade of the nave with two lateral towers (inspired by the bell towers of St. Sargis church in Yerevan and similar to the Armenian Cathedral of Beirut), it differs dramatically from the many historical elements of Armenian architecture. It has used white marble as its exterior material, which has a prominent effect, and its construction is fully reinforced concrete. Notably, the two towers of the church and the large-scale central dome over a hexadecagon base have almost transparent openings, where the

concrete technology allows a series of void areas, which are then covered with glass (Hovhannisian 2015).

The structure originally consisted of one large open floor plan with no columns or posts, but during subsequent damages to the church, it was redesigned and now features 4 prominent central posts and arches in its interior.



Figure 19 Author, Saint Sarkis Cathedral: three exterior views and one interior view of the cathedral. n.d. Photographs. Tehran, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

8.3.2 Surp Khatch Chapel

Surp Khatch, an emblematic Christian structure, blends traditional Armenian architectural elements with modernist aesthetics [fig. 20]. Constructed in 1987 by the talented architect Rostom Voskanian, its design features interconnected crosses in a concrete structure, which ultimately gives the sense of a large-scale sculpture rather than of a small-scale chapel. The project met a lot of resistance from the clergy due to its bold design expressions, but was ultimately approved and completed.

This is probably the most advanced and interesting interpretation of medieval Armenian architecture in the history of Armenian

churches in Iran and is certainly one of the most impressive Armenian religious monuments in Iran (Grigor 2013).

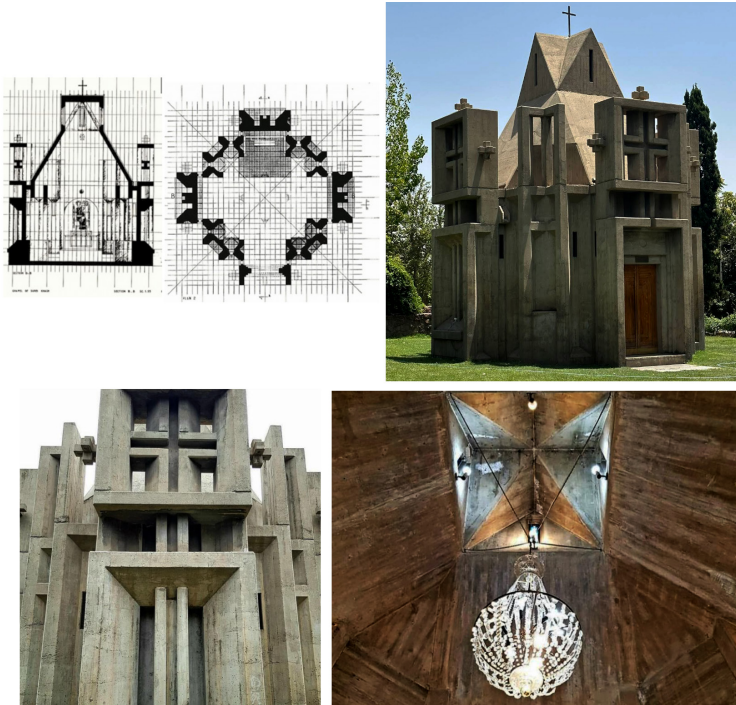


Figure 20 Rostom Voskanian, Surp Khatch Chapel: section and floor drawing, exterior view, detail of exterior decoration, and interior of the dome area. n.d. Photographs and drawings. Tehran, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

9 Preservation

The Armenian churches of Iran represent a significant aspect of the Armenian cultural and religious heritage, reflecting centuries of history, architectural innovation, and community resilience. Located in a historically rich region that has served as a crossroads between various empires, these churches showcase a unique architectural aspect of Armenian churches.

Notably, the churches have served not only as places of worship but also as vital cultural markers for the Armenian community, preserving their heritage in the face of numerous challenges. The preservation of these churches faces ongoing challenges, including structural damage from natural disasters and the pressures of political instability. Recent renovation efforts, supported by the

Iranian government and contributions from the Armenian community, aim to address these issues while reinforcing the churches' roles in local tourism and cultural identity. However, many churches remain abandoned or in disrepair, as the Armenian population is leaving the Islamic Republic of Iran, raising concerns about the future of these important religious and cultural sites. Controversies surrounding the preservation efforts reflect broader societal issues, as the Armenian community in Iran grapples with economic hardships and limited political representation. As custodians of a rich heritage, the Armenian churches of Iran not only encapsulate the historical struggles of their community but also embody the aspirations for cultural preservation and resilience in an ever-changing socio-political landscape.

10 Conclusion

The history of Armenian churches within the larger picture of Armenian architecture worldwide presents very specific aspects. Its unique relationship with the geo-political situation of Iran has impacted the development of church design as in no other country.

A few characteristics are common all over Iran.

The churches are always oriented West-East with apse in the eastern wall and the main entrance in the West. They all have the Bema, the higher platform of the altar space and mostly a railing or fence dividing the altar area from the general prayer hall.

The floor plans are always relatively simple, whether basilica type or cruciform. The altar of the church is always enclosed by the exterior walls and is not recognizable from the outside [fig. 21].

All urban churches are within a private courtyard, somehow shielding them from the neighborhood, which more likely than not was inhabited by the local Muslim population.

Many churches do not have any domes. Others have relatively shallow domes, and if there is a drum, this is often limited in height. In later years, there is also a revival of the conical dome emerging from a flat roof surface.

Often there is a transition zone marked in the body of the church delineating the interior height of the church and the exterior parapet.

In post-Safavid churches, there is often a portico on one or more sides of the church.

Often, the exterior image of the church is similar to its other neighboring buildings and does not distinguish it as a prominent ecclesiastical structure. In New Julfa where the volume of the churches is considerable and all showcase a prominent dome, these are within the tradition of Safavid architecture, and one could easily mistake them for a Safavid building.

Especially in rural areas, there are numerous examples of a church design that is very much Armenian in style with columns and arches, but totally enclosed within a rectangular, not nondescript building [figs 22-24].

Until the sixteenth century, a vast number of churches were built in Northwest Iran, and their relationship with the Armenian architecture of Eastern Armenia/Anatolia, Nakhichevan, and the Karabakh region still requires further studies.

The magnificent churches built by an elite group of Armenian merchants in New Julfa were a surprising breakthrough from the somber images of the Armenian churches and much more Byzantine or European in their interior refinements.

It is also important to note that many Armenian churches, like St. Andreas in Kirman, were built by an Iranian architect, in this case by Me' Mar Ali Mohammad Ravari.

During the Qajar and Pahlavi periods, as the Armenians were granted more privileges and religious freedom, Armenian architects started experimenting with new interpretations of classical Armenian architectural elements. In this context, the chapel of the Holy Cross in Tehran is the first example of a totally different and modern vision of what contemporary Armenian architecture could be. This is de facto the precursor of all modern Armenian architecture that flourished after the fall of the Soviet Union.



Figure 21 Author, Schematic of the enclosed eastern apse and Bema elevation. n.d. Diagram. Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

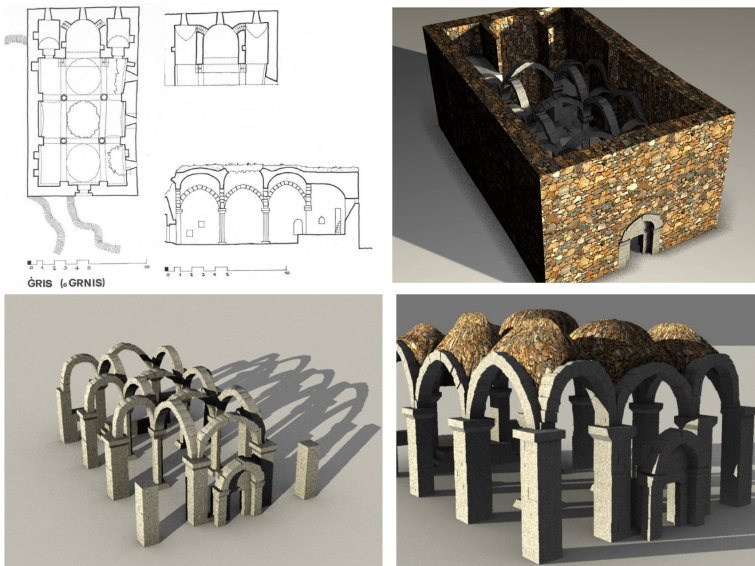


Figure 22 Author, Architectural drawings, 3D digital reconstruction, and diagrams showing the stone structure of the building. n.d. Diagrams and drawings. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

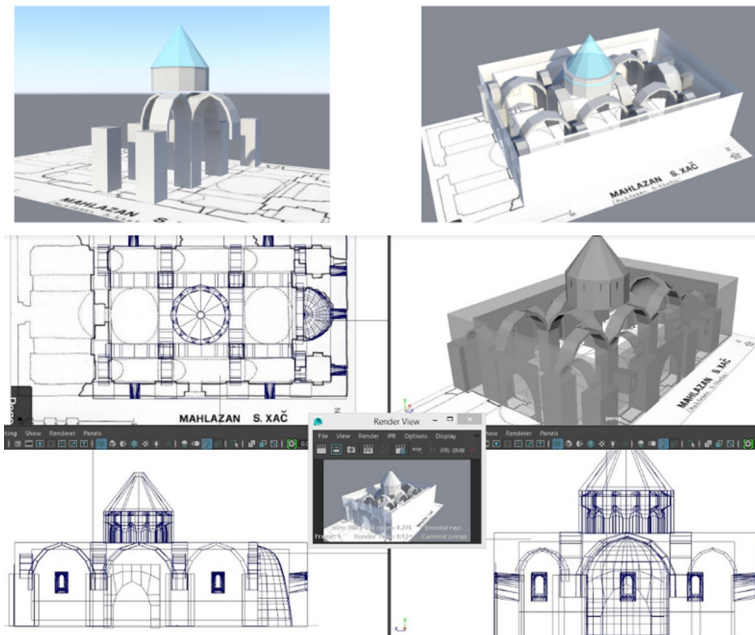


Figure 23 Author, Diagram demonstrating the phases of a 3D digital reconstruction model. n.d. Diagram. SHA Archive, copyright

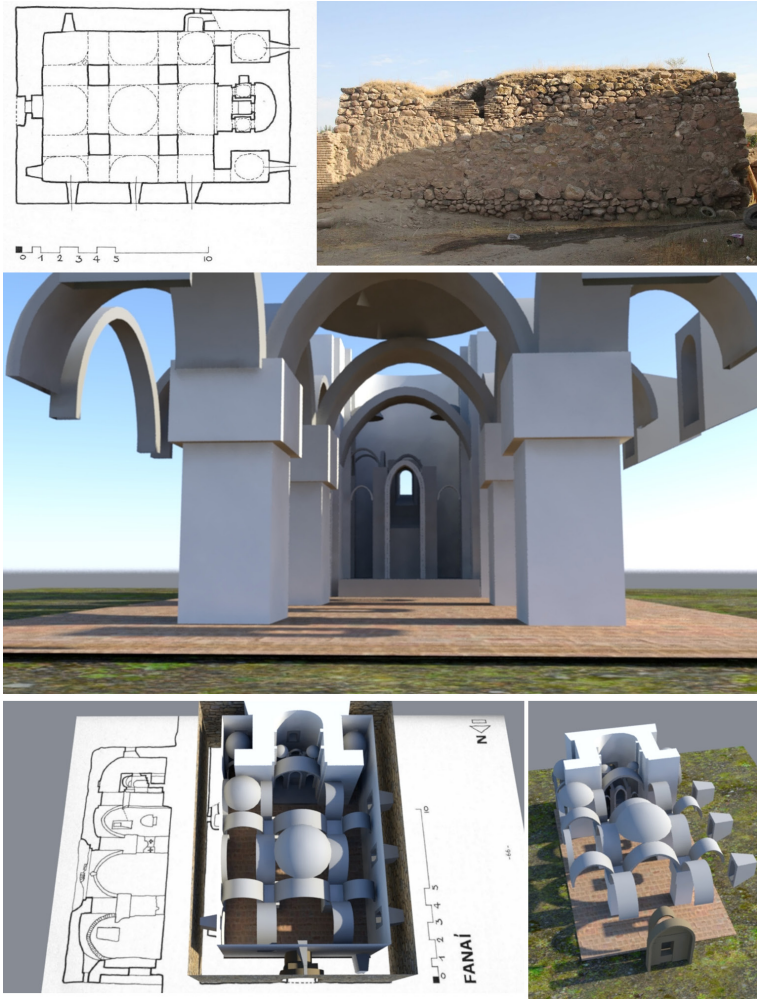


Figure 24 Author, Diagram showing the method used to create the digital 3D model. n.d. Diagram.
SHA Archive, copyright

Bibliography

- Alpago Novello, A. (1988). *Documenti di Architettura Armena*. Vol. 20, *Sorhul*. Milano: Oemme Edizioni.
- Alpago Novello, A.; Brambilla, M.; Uluhogian, G.; Vecchione, N. (1977). *Documenti di Architettura Armena*. Vol. 17, *Gandzasar*. Milano: Oemme Edizioni.
- Alpago Novello, A.; Brambilla, M.; Fiorani Piacentini, V.; Uluhogian, G.; Uluhogian, H.; Vecchione, N. (1979). *Documenti di Architettura Armena*. Vol. 18, *Sevan*. Milano: Oemme Edizioni.
- Arakelian, V. (2000). "Church of St. Mary, Dzor Dzor". *Peyman*, 11-12, 114-26.
- Babaie, S.; Babayan, K.; Baghdiantz McCabe, I.; Farhad, M. (2004). *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Bournoutian, G.A. (1994). *A History of the Armenian People*, vol. 2. Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers.
- Chiftjian, K. (2017). *Journey Through Footsteps of the Armenian Monuments in the Armenian Diocese of Atrpatakan, Azerbaijan-Iran*. Tabriz: Armenian Prelacy.
- Dashdondog, B. (2011). *The Mongols and the Armenians (1220-1335)*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004192119>.
- Grigor, T. (2013). "Rostom Voskanian's Architectural Legacy". *Armenian Mirror Spectator*. <https://mirrorspectator.com/2013/09/26/rostom-voskanians-architectural-legacy/>.
- Haghnazarian, A.; Mehrabian, V. (1991). *Documenti di Architettura Armena*. Vol. 21: *Nor Djulfa*. Venezia: Oemme Edizioni.
- Herzig, E. (1991). *The Armenian Merchants of New Julfa, Isfahan: A Study in Pre-Modern Asian Trade*. [PhD Dissertation]. Oxford: University of Oxford.
- Hofrichter, H.; Uluhogian, G. (1980). *Documenti di Architettura Armena*. Vol. 10, *S. Stephanos*. Milano: Edizione Ares.
- Hovhannisian, R.G. (1977). *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Iskandaryan, G. (2019). "The Armenian Community in Iran: Issues and Emigration". *Global Campus Human Rights Journal* 3(1), 127-140. <http://dx.doi.org/10.25330/1429>.
- Karang, A. (1977). *Asare Bastani Azarbaijan* [Antiquities of Azerbaijan], vol. 1. Tehran: Asar-e Melli.
- Karapetian, S. (2019). *History of Armenia*. Vol. 2, *Salmast*. Yerevan: Research on Armenian Architecture (RAA).
- Kleiss, W.; Seihoun, H. (1971). *Documenti di Architettura Armena*. Vol. 4, *S. Thadei' Vank*. Milano: Edizioni Ares.
- Kroll, S. (2012). *Biainili-Urartu: The Proceedings of the Symposium Held in Munich, 12-14 October 2007*, monogr. no., *Acta Iranica*, 51.
- McCabe, I.B. (1999). *The Shah's Silk for Europe's Silver*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Prezbindowski, L. (2012). *The Ilkhanid Mongols, the Christian Armenians, and the Islamic Mamluks (1220-1335)* [Mater's Thesis]. Louisville, KY: University of Louisville. <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/1152>.
- Sistani, I. (2008). "The S. Sargis Church of Khoy". *Peyman*, 44, 20-8.
- Shahinian, A. (2021). "Armenian Communities of Salmast". Hovannisian, R.G. (ed.), *Armenian Communities of Persia/Iran*. Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 202-25.
- Seid Jamal, T. (1977). *Asar-e Bastani-ye Azarbaijan* [Antiquities of Azerbaijan], vol. 2. Tehran: Asar-e Melli.
- Tajarian, Y.; Gasparyan, G. (2025). "New Julfa as a Juncture of Armenian, European, and Persian Art". In *Armenians in the Orient*, monogr. no., *Oriental Journal*, 60, 41-56.