

Armenian Art in Iran

edited by
Aldo Ferrari and Stefano Riccioni



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Serie diretta da
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Stefano Riccioni

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Abstract

This volume reassesses Armenian art in Iran through the interpretive frameworks of transculturality, connected histories, and cultural entanglement. Contributions by Patrick Donabédian, Levon Chookaszian, Maurizio Boriani, Andreh Marouti, Marco Brambilla, and Talinn Grigor explore architecture, monumental painting, funerary monuments, heritage conservation, and modern architecture, demonstrating that Armenian artistic production in Iran developed through continuous interaction with Persian, Caucasian, Mediterranean, and European traditions. Moving beyond national paradigms, the volume presents Armenian art as a dynamic process of cultural co-creation that reshaped identities over two millennia and offers a new perspective on artistic exchange across Eurasia.

Keywords Armenian Art. Iran. Transculturality. Connected Histories. Cultural Entanglement.

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Armenian Art in Iran

Armenian Art in Iran: An Example of Cultural Interconnection

Stefano Riccioni

Università di Pisa, Italia

This volume collects the proceedings of the international conference *Armenian Art in Iran*, held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice on November 14-15, 2024, as part of the 10th Seminar on Armenian and Eastern Christian Art. The initiative was promoted by the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage and the Department of Asian and North African Studies of Ca' Foscari University through the collaboration between the author and Aldo Ferrari. It was made possible through the scientific, organizational, and financial support of the Salmast Heritage Association, represented by Marco Brambilla and Laura Atoian, whose research has significantly advanced the documentation and promotion of the Armenian cultural heritage of northwestern Iran. The organization of the conference was also supported by the project *Observing South Caucasus' Historical Landscape: An Open Photo Archive (OSCOP)*,¹ developed in partnership

1 The project, funded by Ca' Foscari University of Venice, aims to recover and critically examine a collection of photographs documenting the cultural heritage of the South Caucasus, taken during the Soviet period by Adriano Alpago Novello and other scholars, and to transform it into an open-access digital photo archive. Beatrice Spampinato and Francesca Penoni, members of the project team, actively participated in the organization of the conference.



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with the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max Planck Institute (Gerhard Wolf and Annette Hoffmann) and the Center for the Study and Documentation of Armenian Culture (Minas Lourian).

Armenian art in Iran occupies a distinctive place within the study of the art and culture of the Caucasus and the Near East. Long regarded as a peripheral expression in relation to the principal artistic centers of historical Armenia, it is now undergoing a profound historiographical reassessment. Recent developments in transcultural studies (Welsch 1999, 194-213; Erll 2011, 4-18) and “connected histories” (Zekiyan 2005) have challenged interpretive models based on rigid cultural boundaries and static identities, while critical reflection on the historiography of Armenian, Georgian, and South Caucasian art has revealed the limitations of national paradigms that often separated phenomena shaped by centuries of shared historical experience.²

From this perspective, Armenian artistic production in Iran emerges not simply as the expression of a minority community but as the result of continuous interaction, adaptation, and cultural co-creation. Over more than two millennia – from the Achaemenid and Parthian periods to the Safavid, Afsharid, Qajar, and modern eras – Armenian and Iranian communities shared political institutions, social practices, artistic traditions, and symbolic systems that generated complex cultural stratifications. Accordingly, recent scholarship has shifted from models of one-way influence toward approaches emphasizing multidirectional exchange, mobility, and the constant renegotiation of cultural identities (Subrahmanyam 1997, 735-62).³ Concepts such as “entanglement” (Conrad 2016; Werner, Zimmermann 2006, 30-50), “transculturality” (Ortiz 1947; Rakow, Berg 2017, 186-211), and “multiple consciousness”,⁴ have proven particularly effective in illuminating the complexity of Armenian-Iranian artistic experiences beyond the constraints of national narratives.

The decision to dedicate this 10th edition of the seminars to Armenian art in Iran reflects the conviction that this field offers an exceptional laboratory for investigating cultural interaction across the Eurasian world. The historic regions of Salmas, Maku, Khoy, Tabriz, and Isfahan preserve material evidence documenting various

2 Maranci (2001); Foletti, Thunø (2016); Berg, Rakow (2017); Bacci, Kaffenberger, Studen-Karlen (2018); Foletti, Riccioni (2018); Pogossian, Nucciotti (2025).

3 For a critical overview of the medieval Eurasian and Caucasian context, see also the European research project *Armenia Entangled: Connectivity and Cultural Encounters in Medieval Eurasia 9th-14th Centuries (ArmEn)*, directed by Zaroui Pogossian, University of Florence, and the project *The Southern Caucasus Regions: Heritage, Landscape and Narratives*, directed by Gerhard Wolf at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz.

4 For the art-historical interpretation of postcolonial notions of multiple identities and fragmented consciousness within minority artistic diasporas, see Bhabha (1994).

forms of Armenian presence, revealing how Christian communities continually negotiated their identity within changing political, religious, and cultural contexts. Rather than documenting the history of a minority alone, Armenian art in Iran demonstrates the creative potential of sustained intercultural exchange, in which Armenian, Persian, Caucasian, Mediterranean, and European traditions converged to produce original and enduring artistic forms.

Patrick Donabédian's contribution provides the volume's broad historical framework by reassessing the long-term artistic relationship between Armenia and Iran and challenging the traditional narrative of one-sided Iranian influence on Armenian art. Instead, the author demonstrates that artistic exchange was reciprocal, unfolding over nearly two millennia through successive phases of interaction. He identifies three major stages in this process: the assimilation of Achaemenid and Sasanian architectural and artistic traditions, reciprocal influences during the medieval period, and the transitional forms that paved the way for the architectural developments of the early modern era.

Beginning with antiquity, Donabédian examines archaeological evidence from Armavir, Erebuni, and the hypostyle palace at Beniamin to show how Armenian ecclesiastical architecture incorporated and transformed key Sasanian architectural concepts within a distinctly Armenian stone-building tradition. Among these were the dome on a square base – the Armenian term *gmbet* – itself deriving from the Middle Persian *gumbad* – paired half-columns and blind arcades inspired by the royal palaces of Firuzabad and Ctesiphon, and stepped podiums recalling Zoroastrian fire altars (*atrushand*). His analysis extends beyond architecture to the visual arts, tracing the survival of Sasanian iconographic traditions in Armenian sculpture, manuscript illumination, and architectural decoration. These include the representation of the Magi dressed in Persian princely attire in the *Echmiadzin Gospels*; aristocratic costumes featuring the *kandys* cloak; dynamic hunting scenes executed in the characteristic “flying gallop” motif at Ptghni and Ateni; grape-harvesting scenes; and a rich repertoire of fantastic creatures – including griffins, sphinxes, and the *pseudo-Senmurv* (Compareti 2006; Riccioni 2016). Particularly remarkable is the unique sculpted procession of sixty pitchers carved on the church of Ptghni in the style of Sasanian metalwork (*toreutics*), illustrating the continuity of Persian artistic vocabulary within Armenian monumental sculpture.

The essay further argues that artistic exchange did not flow exclusively from Iran to Armenia. During the High Middle Ages, Armenian architecture may itself have influenced the development of northern Iranian funerary towers through the adoption of the cylindrical drum crowned by a conical roof, a structural solution that subsequently became characteristic of Seljuk *türbe*. Donabédian

also traces the origins of the sophisticated reticulated vaults and double-shell bulbous domes that culminated in the churches of seventeenth-century New Julfa to earlier transitional experiments at Makaravank and Khorakert, thereby revealing the continuity of architectural innovation across regions and centuries.

Levon Chookaszian's essay shifts the discussion from architecture to monumental painting through a detailed study of the frescoes of the Church of Saint George in Haftvan, in the Salmas region. Drawing upon paintings uncovered during the restoration campaigns of 2014 and 2018, the author reconstructs the church's seventeenth-century decorative program. Fragments preserved on the eastern piers and nave walls reveal scenes from the lives of Adam and Eve, representations of the warrior saints Gevorg, Sarkis, Martiros, and Mercurius, the Coronation of the Virgin and Child, and the psychostasis, or weighing of souls, from the Last Judgment. Chookaszian situates these paintings within a broader regional network by comparing them with the mural ensembles of Meghri and Aznaberd in Nakhichevan, while simultaneously demonstrating the circulation of visual models across cultural boundaries. His study shows how Armenian painters creatively adapted compositions derived from Western European engravings imported through merchants and missionaries, thereby highlighting the importance of monumental painting as a vehicle of transcultural exchange. The essay also underscores the need for greater scholarly attention to Armenian mural painting, which has received far less study than manuscript illumination despite its exceptional historical and artistic significance.

The same dynamics of visual exchange and cultural interaction emerged in the rich and stimulating conference paper presented by **Eleanor Sims**, although it could not be included in this volume. Her study focused on three Safavid oil portraits attributed to the Armenian painter Marcos and preserved at Windsor Castle: *The Girl of Julfa*, *Qizilbash Riza* (a Persian dignitary), and *The Turkish Dancer*. The life-size portraits bear a double signature – MARCOS FECIT in Latin and ARVEST MARCOSIN in medieval Armenian – inscribed on the balustrades of the painted terraces. Sims demonstrated how Marcos combined the luxurious textiles and costumes of Safavid Isfahan with the compositional principles of Western European court portraiture, introduced through engravings circulating via merchants and missionaries. By reconstructing the provenance of these paintings, recorded in the British Royal Collection as early as 1688 during the reign of James II, she illuminated both the technical sophistication of the artists trained in the school of Minas at New Julfa and the early English fascination with Persian court culture, further reflected in the contemporary Baroque frames decorated in the chinoiserie style.

The volume's reflection on the material legacy of Armenian communities in Iran continues with **Maurizio Boriani's** essay on the preservation and future enhancement of the Armenian and Assyrian churches of Iranian West Azerbaijan. Through a systematic comparison between the documentation produced during Adriano Alpagó Novello's expeditions of 1976-77 and the field surveys carried out between 2016 and 2018 by the Salmast Heritage Association, the study provides an updated assessment of the condition of this remarkable yet endangered architectural heritage. Boriani identifies widespread structural and material deterioration caused by the region's high seismic activity, the collapse of masonry vaults, the erosion of adobe buildings constructed from sun-dried mud brick, and the gradual abandonment of rural settlements, which has exposed many monuments to vandalism and illicit excavations. Rather than advocating preservation as an end in itself, Boriani frames heritage protection within a broader strategy of sustainable adaptive reuse capable of reconnecting these monuments with contemporary society. Particular emphasis is placed on the potential of "roots tourism", promoted through the return of members of the Armenian diaspora to their ancestral homeland. In this context, the author proposes the inclusion of the churches of St. George in Haftvan and Khoy within the neighboring UNESCO heritage system and advances practical proposals for their reuse. These include converting the Church of St. Sarkis in Khoy into a regional information and documentation center and restoring the remains of a theater discovered within the precinct of the Church of St. George at Haftvan as a lapidary museum dedicated to safeguarding inscriptions and funerary monuments recovered from abandoned cemeteries and threatened archaeological sites. The essay therefore demonstrates that conservation should not be conceived solely as the stabilization of historic fabric but as an integrated cultural strategy capable of generating new forms of research, education, and sustainable local development.

Questions of cultural continuity and historical memory are further explored in **Andreh Marouti's** study of the funerary monuments of Iranian West Azerbaijan. Interpreting cemeteries as 'silent sentinels' of collective identity, the author reconstructs the evolution of Armenian funerary sculpture through a historical and descriptive methodology supported by the extensive photographic archive and drone surveys produced by the Salmast Heritage Association. The research reveals the remarkable regional diversity of funerary monuments, demonstrating that the funerary traditions of Iran frequently diverge from the classical typology of the continental *khachkar*. While the Salmas region preserves large horizontal rectangular stone monuments together with the distinctive ram-shaped zoomorphic stelae characteristic of the Caucasus, central Iran and New Julfa are distinguished by thinner upright slabs that developed after the

forced Armenian relocations under Shah Abbas I. Beyond documenting morphological differences, the study examines the symbolic language carved into these monuments. Geometric and vegetal ornament, together with cosmological symbols such as the cross, the *arevakhach* (Wheel of Eternity), and the Tree of Life, coexist with representations of weapons, agricultural tools, clerical vestments, and other attributes denoting gender, profession, and social status. These motifs reveal a layered visual language in which enduring Armenian traditions were continuously adapted to the cultural environment of Iran while preserving their religious and communal significance. The essay concludes by examining the twentieth-century shift from rural burial grounds to the large urban cemeteries of Tehran and Isfahan, driven by industrialization and internal migration. At the same time, it draws attention to the urgent need for systematic documentation, digital recording, and conservation of the isolated rural cemeteries that remain among the most vulnerable yet least studied components of Armenian cultural heritage in Iran.

The architectural dimension of this heritage is examined in **Marco Brambilla's** historical and typological study of Armenian churches in Iran, a corpus of more than four hundred surviving monuments documenting nearly two millennia of Christian presence. Brambilla proposes a clear architectural taxonomy distinguishing monumental urban churches – characterized by central towers and free-cross plans – from the numerous rural churches constructed with locally available materials such as rough stone, adobe, and timber. The study traces the evolution of this architectural tradition from the medieval monuments of northwestern Iran to its transformation during the Safavid period in Isfahan, where Armenian churches adopted external forms closely resembling the palaces and mosques of the imperial capital while preserving a distinct Christian identity through richly decorated interiors covered with monumental fresco cycles inspired by Byzantine and European artistic traditions. The essay follows the subsequent development of Armenian religious architecture through the Qajar and Pahlavi periods and into the decades following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. By examining landmark projects such as Eugene Aftandilian's Cathedral of St. Sarkis in Tehran and Rostom Voskanian's innovative reinforced-concrete chapel of Surp Khach (Holy Cross), Brambilla demonstrates that Armenian ecclesiastical architecture in Iran has never been a static tradition. Rather, it has continually negotiated between inherited forms and contemporary architectural languages, adapting to changing political, social, and cultural circumstances while preserving its distinctive identity. In this sense, Armenian-Iranian religious architecture emerges not only as a testimony to the past but also as one of the principal foundations from which the contemporary architectural languages of the Armenian diaspora have developed.

The chronological and thematic scope of this volume extends into the twentieth century with **Talinn Grigor's** essay on modernist architecture in Pahlavi Iran, which examines the decisive role played by religious minorities – particularly the Armenian community – in shaping the urban landscape and visual identity of modern Iran. Combining transnational biography with local historical analysis, the study focuses on influential architects such as Gabriel Guevrekian, co-founder of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) and Chief Architect of the Municipality of Tehran, and Vardan Hovhannisian, founder of *Architecte*, the first professional journal of architecture and urban planning published in Iran. Grigor explores the delicate position occupied by these architects, who sought to uphold the programmatically apolitical ideals of the Modern Movement while working within the framework of an authoritarian state committed to rapid modernization. The essay argues that the prominence of architects from minority communities – including Armenians, Assyrians, Bahá'ís, Jews, and Zoroastrians – was closely linked to the multilingual and internationally oriented education provided by private, often missionary, schools. This educational background enabled figures such as Paul Apcar, Yougenia Aftandilians, Rostom Voskanian, and the pioneering architect Nektar Papazian Andreeff to transform their cultural marginality into a professional advantage, becoming leading protagonists of Iran's architectural modernity.

The essays collected in this volume, enriched by the discussions generated during the conference, offer a comprehensive reassessment of Armenian art in Iran. Moving beyond the traditional perception of these artistic expressions as peripheral phenomena, they reconstruct a millennia-long history of interaction through the interpretive frameworks of transculturality, connected history, and cultural co-creation. From Donabédian's analysis of Sasanian and medieval artistic exchanges, to Chookaszian's and Sims's studies of seventeenth-century painting, and the field research of the Salmast Heritage Association presented by Marouti, Boriani, Brambilla, and Grigor on funerary monuments, historic churches, secular heritage, and twentieth-century architecture, the volume demonstrates the Armenian community's enduring capacity to negotiate, preserve, and redefine its identity within the Iranian cultural sphere.

More broadly, this collection is intended not only as a historiographical and documentary synthesis, but also as a practical and theoretical resource for future scholarship. At the same time, it constitutes a transnational appeal for the active protection, digital documentation, and sustainable conservation of an exceptional cultural heritage. Rather than viewing Armenian monuments in Iran solely as the legacy of a minority community, this volume invites readers to recognize them as the product of one of the most enduring and creative processes of cultural interaction in the Eurasian world,

deserving renewed scholarly attention and long-term international cooperation for their preservation and study.

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The Question of Persian Models in Armenian Architecture, from the Sassanids to the Safavids

Patrick Donabédian

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Abstract The article attempts a succinct synthesis of all that Armenian architecture and related arts owe to the models offered by Iran/Persia over the centuries, even millennia. Particular attention is paid to three chapters: a) the Sassanian heritage, b) possible exchanges around tomb towers at the start of Islamization, and c) the reticulated networks of the Middle Ages and modern period. The latter theme magnifies the ‘miracle’ of New Julfa, home to a remarkable Armenian-Iranian syncretism.

Keywords Iranian influence on Armenian art and architecture. Sassanian dome on square via squinches. Sassanian iconographic and ornamental themes. Blind colonnade-arcade. North-Iranian tomb towers. Khachkars of Old Julfa. Reticulated pendentives and bands. Armenian churches of New Julfa.

Summary 1 Introduction: A Reverse Perspective on an Immense Legacy. – 2 Brief Prologue: First Traces of Exchanges in Antiquity. – 3 Possible Sassanian Contributions to Armenian Architectural Devices. – 4 Sassanian Iconographic Themes in Armenian Architecture and Art. – 5 North-Iranian Tomb Towers of Eleventh c. Between Armenian and Seljuk Architectures. – 6 Reticulated Pendentives and Bands in Medieval and Late Medieval Periods. – 7 Conclusion: Prodigious New Julfa as a Condense Picture of a Very Old Kinship.

1 Introduction: A Reverse Perspective on an Immense Legacy

The communications made during our conference on *Armenian art in Iran*, very naturally and logically, were devoted to the study of Armenian works created in Iran as witnesses of Iranian-Armenian (or Armenian-Iranian) exchanges, and as vectors of diversity and novelty in both cultures. My position is a little different, as I am a historian of Armenian art and especially architecture, who has, it is true, a great interest in ‘diasporic’ Armenian productions, but has more explored the history of art and architecture in Armenia itself, trying to understand its ways of development, its roots, borrowings and exchanges. For that reason, I thought that it might be useful to propose, in addition to our colleagues’ contributions, a glance from the opposite side. That is why this article, taking up and developing my paper presented at our Venice conference, will attempt to approach the question of Iranian/Persian-Armenian artistic relations with the inverse perspective, i.e. by presenting the Christian monuments of medieval Armenia as possible receivers of Iranian/Persian imprints in the field of architecture and architectural decoration, and also, in certain cases, as possible providers of new devices.

To set the framework of this essay, it seems useful to first recall some important data:

- a. the multi-millennial proximity between the two populations, Armenian and Iranian;
- b. the weight and duration of Iranian dominations on Armenia, first in Antiquity, under the Medes and the Achaemenid Persians (sixth-fourth centuries BC), then under the branch of the Parthian Arsacid dynasty (relatively soon Armenianised) which ruled Armenia from the beginning of the New Era until late fourth-early fifth century, and during the authority of Sassanid Persia on the eastern part of Armenian territory from 387/428 to about 640-50.¹ Later, from the sixteenth to

¹ A synthesis (with a bibliography) on the Iranization of ancient Armenia can be found in Dédéyan 2007, 101-162, ch. 3, *Les Arméniens entre l’Iran et le monde gréco-romain*. See also Grousset 1973, 105-295, ch. 6, 105-20, *Le protectorat romain et les rois arsacides d’Arménie*; ch. 7, 121-62, *Les Arsacides chrétiens*; ch. 8, 163-295, *L’Arménie sous l’hégémonie sassanide*. See also Khatchatrian 1971, 11-3; Russel 1987; 2004; Zekiyan 2005; many precious commentaries in Garsoïan 1989 and an excellent overview of Armenian-Iranian relations from the Achaemenids to the Sassanids by Garsoïan [2004] (2018), based on Garsoïan 1997. More recently, Nina Garsoïan and Maxime Yévadian (2021) have taken an interesting look at Armenian-Iranian ‘Intersections’ in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Touraj Daryaee (2021) has observed the formation, after the ‘pan-Arsacid world’ or ‘Parthian commonwealth’ established at the beginning of our era, of a ‘distinct Armenia’ as a consequence of the creation by the Sassanids in the third c. of “a political entity in the name of Iran”. For her part, Nina Iamanidze (2019, 96-7) underlined the deep prechristian roots of the Persian-Iberian kinship.

- the first decades of nineteenth century, again the eastern part of Armenia was under the rule of the Safavid, Afshar, Zand and Qajar dynasties;²
- c. the deep cultural link that united the two peoples, particularly in the antique and late-antique periods, the kinship in social and administrative structure, in mores and the way of life between the two aristocracies before the adoption of Christianity by Armenians and of Islam by Persians;³
 - d. the strong Iranian imprint on ancient Armenian creeds and pantheon;⁴
 - e. the considerable mark left since antiquity by the Iranian lexical fund (the richest external contribution) in the Armenian language,⁵ as well as the Iranian layer in Armenian onomastics;⁶
 - f. the fact that, according to the historian of Armenia's Christianisation, Agathangelos (fifth c.), the evangelizer of Armenia, Saint Gregory the Illuminator (ca. 239-ca. 326), was the son of a Parthian prince (Agathangelos 2003, 1322-4, ch. *Life and history of Saint Gregory*, B, 21, C, 7);
 - g. the positive connotations in Armenian of the nouns Iranian (*ari* in Arm.), and Parthian (*part'ew* in Arm.) which mean, used

2 See enlightening (but scattered) passages on eastern Armenia under Persian domination between sixteenth and nineteenth centuries in Mahé, Mahé 2012, 338-421, in diverse parts of ch. 9-11: *Empires, Lumières and Modernité*.

3 Hunting, for example, was the favourite occupation of the elites in both societies. We will see a little later the wide manifestation of this cultural community in the arts. A thorough study was conducted by Petar Goliński on the considerable depth of the Iranian stratum in late antique Armenia: Goliński (2013).

4 See Aharonian 1980, 7, 9, 12 and *passim*; Grousset 1973, 116-20; Abeghyan 1968, 19-21; 1975, 15; Russel 1987; Garsoïan [2004] 2018.

5 The Iranian borrowings present in the Armenian language are much more numerous than the words of the properly Armenian lexical fund. The latter are estimated at between 400 and 700. This figure must be multiplied by two or three to obtain the number of Iranian borrowings, from Middle Parthian (during the reign of the Arsacids), and from Sassanian Pahlavi. Abeghyan (1968, 20) mentions 800 Iranian roots; Atjaryan (1940, 218-323) presents 1405 Iranian lexical units entered into Armenian, of which 960 from Pahlavi. He points out that, of these, 581 are still used in modern Armenian (Atjaryan 1940, 323). See also Jahukyan 1987, 488-584; Schmitt 1983; Nichanian 1989, 58-69.

6 See Atjaryan 1942-62. Petar Goliński (2013) noted for example that the overwhelming majority of the names of Armenian kings in antiquity and at the beginning of our era are Iranian. Garsoïan ([2004] 2018) cites the case, "in the 1st century CE, long before the consolidation of the Arsacid dynasty in Armenia, [of] the Roman candidate to the Armenian throne, prince Zeno of Pontus, [who] wisely changed his Greek name to the more acceptable one of Artaxias/Artašēs upon his accession".

as adjectives, respectively ‘brave and valiant’ and ‘strong, big and courageous’ (Malkhaseants 1944, 1: 266; 4: 83).⁷

2 Brief Prologue: First Traces of Exchanges in Antiquity

It is during the Sassanian period (third-seventh centuries CE) that the borrowings, by Armenian builders and artists, of Persian forms began to widely and obviously manifest themselves. Nevertheless traces of such transfers or elements of Iranian-Armenian kinship can be observed at earlier periods [fig. 1].

2.1 The Pectoral from Armavir

The city of Armavir on the site of the Urartian Argishtikhinili fortress-town became, from 331 BC, the capital of Orontid/Yeruandid Armenia (331-190 BC), which had regained independence after Alexander the Great's victory over the Achaemenid Empire. During excavations in 1963, an exceptional crescent-shaped pectoral was discovered [fig. 1.1]. It is made of cloisonné gold, the compartments of which were initially filled with light blue, black and white enamel. It is dated between the sixth and fourth centuries BC and considered to be later than Urartu but prior to Orontid independence and therefore linked to the Achaemenid period (Karapetian, Santrot 1996, 196; Khatchatrian 2007, 161, fig. 108). A rich symbolism linked to the worship of various deities, fertility, immortality... is attributed to the two stylized doves, the three schematized trees of life that separate them, and the hanging festoon of lotus flowers and buds. The motifs that make up the central compartment with three trees between two rows of head-to-toe triangles are characteristic of Urartian art but can also be seen on bas-reliefs of Persepolis. This pectoral is considered to be an heir to the Urartian tradition, but executed by Achaemenid or Armenian craftsmen.

2.2 The Median/Achaemenid-style rhyton from Erebuni

Excavations carried out in 1968 on the Urartian site of Erebuni fortress (eighth-seventh centuries BC, with post-Urartean phases),

⁷ In this regard, Annie and Jean-Pierre Mahé speak of an “idealization of the Parthian past in Armenian tradition” (Mahé, Mahé 2012, 75). Note that this is not the case with the ethnonym *parsik* = Persian, probably because of the violent Zoroastrian proselytism of the Sassanid Persians in Armenia, and their hostility to the Arsacid (Armenianized) Parthian dynasty of Armenia, which resulted in the latter's abolition in 428.

currently a southern quarter of Yerevan, capital of the Republic of Armenia, unearthed a silver rhyton that was obviously subsequent to the fall of Urartu [fig. 1.2]. It is generally dated to the fifth century BC. This rhyton is adorned ('ridden') by the figure of a horseman whose dress, headgear - marked with an eagle on both sides - and *akinakes* (dagger) are typical Median attributes.⁸ Given certain peculiarities attesting his high rank (notably the above-mentioned eagle image), it is assumed that the horseman represents a prince of the local Orontid/Yeruandid dynasty.⁹ It is proposed to identify him with Orontes I, a member of this dynasty, who exercised from 401 BC the function of satrap of one of the two satrapies of Armenia (the 18th) which were parts of the Achaemenid Empire. Along with the pectoral mentioned above, this rhyton could therefore be one of the oldest surviving Armenian objects of Iranian, more precisely Achaemenid,¹⁰ inspiration.

2.3 The Beniamin 'Palace'

The site of Beniamin, located about ten km south of Gyumri, in the northwest of the current Republic of Armenia, contains, on a hill, the remains of a group of buildings conventionally called 'palace', excavated since 1989. Several clues allow to date them to the fifth-fourth centuries BC, a period when Armenia was included in Achaemenid Persia. Two halls are particularly noteworthy, as they were hypostyles and retain two column bases, later reused, which are clearly Achaemenid. One of them, in particular, has a sculpted treatment characteristic of Achaemenid, notably Persepolitan, architecture, although it is smaller and lower than the norm [fig. 1.3]. Indeed, between its square plinth and upper torus, its campaniform body is decorated with more or less lotiform fluted leaves (Ter-Martirossov 2007, 100; Ter-Martirossov, Deschamps 2007).

⁸ Arakelyan (1976, 42-3); Tiratsyan (1988, 52-3); Ter-Martirossov (1996, with brief bibliography at page 200); Khatchatrian (2007, 158, fig. 105 - our fig. 1.2).

⁹ According to Garsoïan ([2004] 2018), the Orontids/Yeruandids, whose name derives from Avestan *auruuant* (mighty, hero), were of Iranian origin.

¹⁰ The mentioned details are proper to figurations of Medes in Achaemenid art. According to Peter Calmeyer (1986/2017), it is difficult to identify characteristics of Median works of art. Here we are dealing with a piece datable well after the fall of the Medes and thought to represent a governor in the service of the Achaemenids. On the rhyton, along with the Median dagger, Vladimir Lukonin (1977, 76) emphasizes the typically Achaemenid character of the saddlecloth and its ornamentation.

This group of buildings, within a large estate still little studied,¹¹ attests the presence in the north of eastern Armenia of local or Persian representatives of the Achaemenid power. We will come back to this site later, when we consider the hypothesis that the plan of the Iranian hypostyle hall could be transmitted to Christian Armenia.

2.4 The Crown of Artaxiad Kings

The Artaxiad or Artashesid dynasty (named after its founder Artaxias/Artashes – r. 189-160 BC) which ruled Armenia from about 189 BC to the beginning of the New Era was probably of Orontid or perhaps of Persian Achaemenid origin. In any case, under their rule, Armenia was subject to a large Greco-Roman influence, before coming under the control of Rome around 66 BC. Nevertheless, strong links remained with the Iranian tradition. The crown worn by these kings is one of the witnesses to this. We know it mainly from the coins minted by the most famous representative of this dynasty, Tigran II ‘the Great’ (r. 95-55 BC) [fig. 1.4]. In his analysis, Antonio Invernizzi explains that the “Armenian tiara [is] a clearly Iranian mark [...], a combination of Achaemenid features [...]. The cylindrical body and toothed end are said to descend from the tiara of the Kings of Kings” (Invernizzi 2007, 180; Garsoïan [2004] 2018). While the eight-pointed star between two eagles turning their heads backwards is a very common motif in the Hellenistic culture of the ancient Near East, especially among the Seleucids. It marries the star which symbolizes the celestial protection of the sun god Apollo/Mithra and the eagle which represents the supreme deity Zeus/Ahura Mazda. The same ‘Armenian tiara’ was worn by the kings of Commagene (Nemrud Dag) of the first century BC who claimed to have Orontid ancestors (Mahé, Mahé 2012, 32) [fig. 1.5]. Thus the crown of the Artaxiad kings was, by the duality of its symbols, the emblem of the mixed Iranian and Greco-Roman cultural orientation of Armenia at the end of antiquity and the beginning of the New Era.

¹¹ A new scientific project was launched in 2024 for a resumption of the archaeological study of the Beniamin site by the French ArchéOrient laboratory of the University of Lyon 2 and the CNRS, in collaboration with the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of Armenia. See Aghikyan, Gondet, Laisney 2025. In 2026-29 it will be included in a wider programme concerning the province of Shirak, called FACE (From Achaemenid to Christian Era), and financed by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche and the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs.

2.5 Horsemen on Clay Plaques from Artashat

In 1973, during excavations at the site of Artashat, the capital of Artaxiad/Artashesid Armenia, small terracotta plaques dating from the beginning of our era and depicting a horseman were discovered. Along with stylistic features revealing Greco-Roman affinities, some researchers have convincingly identified in the iconography of the horseman and his mount a manifestation of the cult of Mithra.¹² Nina Garsoïan mentioned “the representation of an idealized rider who must be Mithra the hunter”. However, given the extremely wide geography of this cult – in ancient Armenia, the local version of Mithra, Mihr, was also very popular and the horse was associated with his cult – the depictions of horsemen are probably not the most significant trace of a specifically Iranian imprint.



Figure 1 First Iranian imprints on Armenian art and architecture. 1.1 Pectoral from Armavir (sixth-fourth c. BC). Photo Jacques Santrot (1996, 196, n° 180); 1.2 Rhyton from Erebuni (fifth c. BC). Photo Claude Sintès (2007, 158, n° 105); 1.3 Beniamin «palace». Base of column (fifth-fourth c. BC). Photo PD; 1.4 Coin of king Trdat II (r. 95-55 BC). Photo Claude Sintès (2007, 183, n° 144); 1.5 King Antiochus I of Commagene (first c. BC), Nemrut dag, Turkey. Photo Zaven Sargsyan

¹² See Arakelyan 1976, pl. LXXXVIII, LXXXIX; Khachatryan 1981, 180-4, pl. XXVI; Garsoïan 1997, 15, fig. 4; Garsoïan [2004] 2018.

3 Possible Sassanian Contributions to Armenian Architectural Devices

3.1 Dome on Square Via Squinches

Given the above-mentioned immense legacy, it is not surprising that several models of Sassanian origin can be presumed or identified in the Armenian productions, especially architectural ones, of the early Christian (fifth-sixth cc.) and pre-Arab period (a large part of the seventh c.). However, the architectural exchanges remained more in the shadows than the iconographical ones (which will be reviewed below). Nevertheless, the hypothesis of a Sassanian contribution to the genesis of the Armenian (and Iberian = Georgian) dome on a square base, notably through the intermediary of squinches, has been evoked for a long time.¹³ Let us remind that ‘squinch’ designates, to simplify, as far as its main architectural function in Persian and Armenian context is concerned, a half-cone which ensures, placed at each of the four angles of the square formed by the supports of the dome’s drum, the transition to the latter’s circular (Persia) or octagonal (Armenia) base [fig. 2].

During the early Christian period (fourth-sixth cc.), Armenian architecture showed a predominance of longitudinal compositions without a dome (Donabédian 2008, 33-50). But at the same time, several remains of memorial or martyrial chapels with domes are preserved, which, although undated, seem to belong to the early Christian period (Donabédian 2008, 28-30, 57). Towards the end of the fifth century, two important churches, the cathedral of Echmiadzin and St. Sergius of Tekor, almost certainly featured a dome on a tetrapod base (Donabédian 2008, 50-7). Probably from the late sixth century and certainly from the beginning of the seventh century, Armenian compositions with a dome on a square plan used squinches to ensure the transition from the square to the octagonal base of the

¹³ Strzygowski (1918, I, 359-369, II, 504); Yovsepean (1944, 27, 29, 40, 42-3); Toramanyan (1948, 33); Agababyan (1950, 23); Jakobson (1950, 25); Ghirshman (1962, 290); Tokarskii (1964, 59, 61, 65, 66 [with strong reservations]); De’ Maffei (1973, 300-307); Silvi Antonini (1977, 449 [concerning Iberia/Georgia]); Mailov (1979, 32-33). As for Chubinashvili (1969, 63), he merely refers to the numerous Sassanian domes on squinches without establishing any clear link of influence with those of Christian South Caucasus. For his part, Pope ([1969] 1976, 36) simply mentions that “Christian acceptance of a Sasanian architectural type reached medieval Europe”.

dome-bearing drum.¹⁴ The squinch was maintained until the middle of the seventh century, when it was supplanted (not totally) by the pendentive (examples of pendentives in seventh century Armenia: Donabédian 2008, 119-21, 126-7 *et passim*).

As some authors have recalled, the transition by means of squinches (of various types) existed here and there, both in the West and in the East Christian world, as early as the fifth-sixth centuries CE (Chubinashvili 1969, 63-64; Kazaryan 2012, 1: 236-42). But the most homogeneous corpus is found in Sassanian Persia from the third to seventh centuries CE. Indeed, the dome on four half-cone shaped squinches is attested during the Sassanian period, both on palatine buildings and on sanctuaries. The first group includes the main halls of Firuzabad, Bishapur, Qalah-i Duktar/Qala-ye Doktor (third c.) and Sarvistan (fifth c.) palaces [figs 2.1, 2.2].¹⁵ In the second group, one finds several examples of the main sanctuary of Zoroastrianism (Mazdaism), which became the official religion again under the Sassanid dynasty: the fire temple or pyraeus, known as *ateshgah* or *chahartak* in Pahlavi [figs 2.3, 2.4].¹⁶ The base is square in plan, and either tetrapod or (mainly) cubic in elevation, and from it, the transition to the base of the dome is always made by squinches. The dating of these sanctuaries is uncertain, but their frequent presence in Sassanian Persia, during the third-seventh centuries (and also in the early Islamic period), is not in doubt.

Four peculiarities must be noted in Sassanian constructions with a dome on four squinches: a) the dome, in particular in the first group, is mainly ovoid/parabolic (vertically stretched), b) the drum is almost absent; when preserved or rebuilt, it is limited to a low, externally square belt, corresponding to the inner register with squinches, c) the building technique uses bricks and small rubble stones, d) the suppleness of this technique, thanks to the use of small units, permits to integrate the squinches in a smooth transition from the square to the circular basis of the dome (Huff 1993, 45-56).

These four traits seem totally foreign to Armenian practice and stone architecture, but in fact, they just require an adaptation to

¹⁴ For the first squinches in Armenia, forming usually two superimposed rows, see Donabédian (2008, 68, 70, 76, 78-9, 84, 86, 105-7 *et passim*). In the churches of the Avan-Hripsime type (late sixth-early seventh c.), sorts of squinches are combined with a horizontal curved band to permit the transition to the circular basis of the drum. See Donabédian (2008, 80-4).

¹⁵ Ghirshman (1962, 124, fig. 161; 139, fig. 177; 181, fig. 222; Huff (1993, 47, fig. 17-18; 48, fig. 23-24; 49, fig. 25; 51). See also Bloom & Blair (2009, 3, s.v. 'Squinch', 228-30) according to whom (229) the squinch "may well have originated in Sasanian Persia and been quickly assimilated by Late Imperial Rome [...] and later become a characteristic of Byzantine buildings".

¹⁶ See Godard 1949, 187-209; Ghirshman 1962, 50, fig. 193; Huff 1993, 43, fig. 15; 51-5, fig. 29-32, 35.

different techniques and materials. As for the feeble height of the drum, one has to remember that the earliest drums in Christian Armenia were often short (low) and even (in one case) absent [figs 2.5, 2.6].¹⁷ Finally, it should be remembered that the parabolic shape of the domes was not totally unknown to Armenian architects. Indeed, the surveys of Tiran Marutyan showed that the south-east angular chamber of Avan Cathedral (end of the sixth century), now in ruins, was covered by an ovoid dome [fig. 2.7], which was probably the case also for the other three angular chambers (Marutyan 1976, 16-17; 2003, 47-9). In other words, the hypothesis of a Sassanian imprint on the elaboration of Armenian domes on a square base through squinches seems plausible.¹⁸

Two arguments support this hypothesis. A) The term which designates in Armenian the dome, *gmbet'*, was borrowed from Pahlavi/Middle Persian *gumbad*, *gmbat*, and Old Persian *kunbad*, *gunbad*, which have the same meaning (Atjaryan 1971, 567). B) Several sources indicate that the Sassanids had fire temples erected in Armenia to impose their religion on the Armenian population by force (Donabédian 2008, 50-1, note 122; Garibian de Vartavan 2009, 329). Called *atrushan* in Armenian (again a Pahlavi borrowing) (Atjaryan 1971, 290-1, in particular the Pahlavi *atur* 'fire'), these are not preserved but certainly existed. It is possible that they passed on their model to Christian Armenians. One of the *atrushans* is believed to have been discovered under the apse of Echmiadzin cathedral (Sahinian 1966, 67-8, 70, pl. XVIII, fig. 13, pl. XXIX), but the identification as a fire temple of what looks like a modest traditional hearth and may have been a relic pit does not seem convincing (Garibian de Vartavan 2009, 330-1).

¹⁷ Donabédian (2008, 28 and 57 [Voghjaberd - without a drum; Mount Sepuh, St. Gregory chapel - low drum], 76 [Arzni - low drum]). A low drum is still present around 620 at St. Hripsime (Donabédian 2008, 84-5). At St. Sergius of Tekor (late fifth c.), on the contrary, the drum was rather high and externally cubic (Donabédian 2008, 54-5), as in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (first half of fifth c.).

¹⁸ For his part, Kazaryan (2012, I, 237-41) emphasizes the ubiquity of squinches solutions over a vast area at about the same time, notably in Sassanian Persia, and prefers to underline the originality of the solutions adopted by Armenian and Georgian builders. Nevertheless, in another publication, co-authored with Lilit Mikayelyan, he nuances his position by writing "The impact both of Byzantine and Iranian [= Sassanian] models in the creation of a specific shape of under-dome squinch-pendentive transitions by Armenian masters of the early seventh century seems obvious". Then he calls "pure Sasanian system" several domed constructions with squinches of fifth-sixth centuries in northern Mesopotamia and Italy (Kazaryan, Mikayelyan 2019, 75, 77).



Figure 2 Sassanian and early Christian Armenian domes on square base and squinches.

2.1-4: Sassanian, photos Fabien Krähenbühl. 2.1 Firuzabad, castle of king Ardashir (third c. CE);

2.2 Qalah-i Duktar palace (third c. CE). 2.3-4: Niasar, Chahar-taq (Fire temple) (probably before seventh c.).

2.5-7: Early Christian Armenian. 2.5 Mount Sepuh, Turkey, mausoleum of St Gregory (ca. fifth-sixth cc.).

Photo Ch. & J.-C. Hotellier; 2.6 Voghjaberd chapel (ca. fifth-sixth cc.), plan, section and restitution by Nikolai Tokarskii; 2.7 Avan Cathedral (590s), survey of SE chamber and lateral section of Western part by Tiran Marutyan

3.2 Palatine Halls with Basilical Layout

Some authors have attributed a Sassanian origin to the basilical structure of the pre-Arab Armenian palatine halls of Dvin, Zvartnots and Arutj.¹⁹ Just as Greek and Roman civil basilicas gave rise to large Christian churches, it is logical that in the East, the vast hypostyle palatine halls of antiquity, such as the famous Achaemenid *apadanas*,

¹⁹ See Jakobson 1950, 51; Mnatsakanyan, Stepanyan 1971, 7, 26. On these halls: Donabédian 2008, 211-17.

served as models for subsequent centuries, while retaining their palatine function. This is what we see in the Sassanian period with the great hypostyle halls in the palaces. It seems plausible that these could inspire the builders who served the Armenian princes. But one factor considerably weakens such a hypothesis – the existence in Armenia of a long local tradition of hypostyle palatine halls, attested as early as the kingdom of Urartu, and manifested here and there over the centuries,²⁰ not to mention possible Hellenistic-Roman collateral contributions.

The example of the above-mentioned Beniamin site is enlightening in this respect. About five hundred meters southeast of the Achaemenid-era ‘palace’, where we noted the traces of two hypostyle halls, the remains of a Hellenistic-period complex were unearthed. This included a large longitudinal hall with two rows of columns, in other words, a basilica with three naves. In accordance with the general rule in civil basilicas, here the three naves had equal width (on the contrary, in Christian churches of basilical type, the central nave is much wider than the side aisles, and it ends, on the east side, with a rounded apse that houses the high altar). According to Beniamin excavations codirector Hamazasp Khachatryan, the building can be dated to the early first century BC (Khachatryan 2007, 113).

Taking into account the wide ubiquity and great longevity of the oblong basilica composition with three naves applied to large ceremonial halls, it does not seem reasonable to link its Armenian manifestations of the seventh century CE specifically to a Sassanian influence.

3.3 Blind Colonnade-Arcade

The hypothesis of a Sassanian contribution to the genesis of the Armenian blind colonnade-arcade [fig. 3] is little studied. Josef Strzygowski and later Fernanda De Maffei were some of the few to mention it, while Roman Ghirshman merely writes about the influence of Sassanian blind colonnade-arcade in general terms.²¹ More recently, Armen Kazaryan and Lilit Mikayelyan turned to this question again (Kazaryan, Mikayelyan 2019, 81). The first observation which must be made in this regard is that it was in Sassanian Persia,

²⁰ Donabédian 2008, 211 and fn.; 366. Nevertheless, it is disconcerting that, according to Atjaryan (1979, 365), the Armenian word *tačar* = ‘palace’, ‘temple’, comes from the old-Persian *tačara* = palace, which seems to confirm a particular link with the Persian palaces tradition.

²¹ See Strzygowski 1918, 1: 438-9, 444-5; Ghirshman 1962, 291-3. De Maffei (1968, 24) considers that the facades of the Sassanian palaces, despite their “fairly classical rigour”, may have been the origin of the Armenian blind arcades.

particularly on the great royal buildings of Firuzabad (Dieulafoy 1885, IV, 44, fig. 29) (third c. CE), and Ctesiphon/Taq-e Kisra (Dieulafoy 1889, V, 242, pl. 3; Kröger [1993] 2011) (third or sixth c.), that the colonnade-arcade had its most monumental manifestations of Late Antiquity [figs 3.1-3].

This remarkable way of enlivening façades and emphasizing their verticality was widely adopted in Armenia [figs 3.4, 3.5], then in Iberia/Georgia, since the seventh century, and further brilliantly developed all over the centuries by both architectural schools (Donabédian 2024). One of its main sources is certainly classical and early Christian Roman art. Indeed blind colonnades-arcades are present on Roman architectural works and their sculpted representations, and on the lateral (long) sides of many sarcophagi. Among the oldest buildings still visible, one can mention the Golden Portal of Diocletian's palace at Spalato/Split (ca. 305), the so-called Basilica of Constantine or 'Aula Palatina' in Trier (third-fourth cc., rebuilt in the nineteenth c.), the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (first half of the fifth c.) and several early Christian constructions in Asia Minor, notably in Tur Abdin and Cilicia (Donabédian 2024, 48-50).

This vast corpus includes two different principles that sometimes combine: a) a row of half-columns and engaged arches above them, all projecting on the façade or the surface that carries them, and b) a row of flat niches, arched in their upper part, 'hollowed' in the surface they decorate. To put it simply, sarcophagi belong to the first group, while in the medieval West and in the Byzantine world, the second formula, that of flat niches, predominates. Armenia, for its part, has above all opted for the first principle, that of the projecting colonnade-arcade.

In Sassanian Persia, impressive rows of niches, arched at their top, now much eroded, are partially preserved on the above-mentioned royal palaces. It is thus mainly the principle of flat niches 'hollowed' into the façade that is applied. However on both palaces, Firuzabad and Taq-e Kisra, the niches are separated by high half-columns protruding from the façade, which almost creates a combination of the two principles [figs 3.1-3]. It is interesting to note that on the palace of Taq-e Kisra, the powerful first register with two levels of arched niches is punctuated by strong pairs of engaged columns. Now, in Armenia, since the seventh century, blind colonnades are mainly made up of pairs of half-columns [figs 3.4, 3.5] (a kinship underlined by Josef Strzygowski 1918, 1: 438-9).

It should also be noted that Persian artists, like Roman and early Christian sculptors of sarcophagi, had the idea of reducing the colonnade-arcade and using it on minor forms. They applied it to the

decoration of silver vases.²² Here, too, as on the Roman sarcophagi, the half-columns (often double) and half-arches protrude and serve as frame for human figurations (here, female figures of dancers).

To conclude on this subject, it can be assumed that, while the main source of the Armenian blind colonnade-arcade is, in all likelihood, Roman, a Sassanian contribution to its genesis is also very plausible. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the Armenian elites and the architects in their service were not impressed by the powerful effect of the devices that covered the façades of their Persian overlords' palaces.

22 See three examples from the fifth-seventh centuries in Trever, Lukonin (1987, 112-13, n° 18-20, figs. 36-53); and in Overlaet (1993, 234-8, n° 85-87).

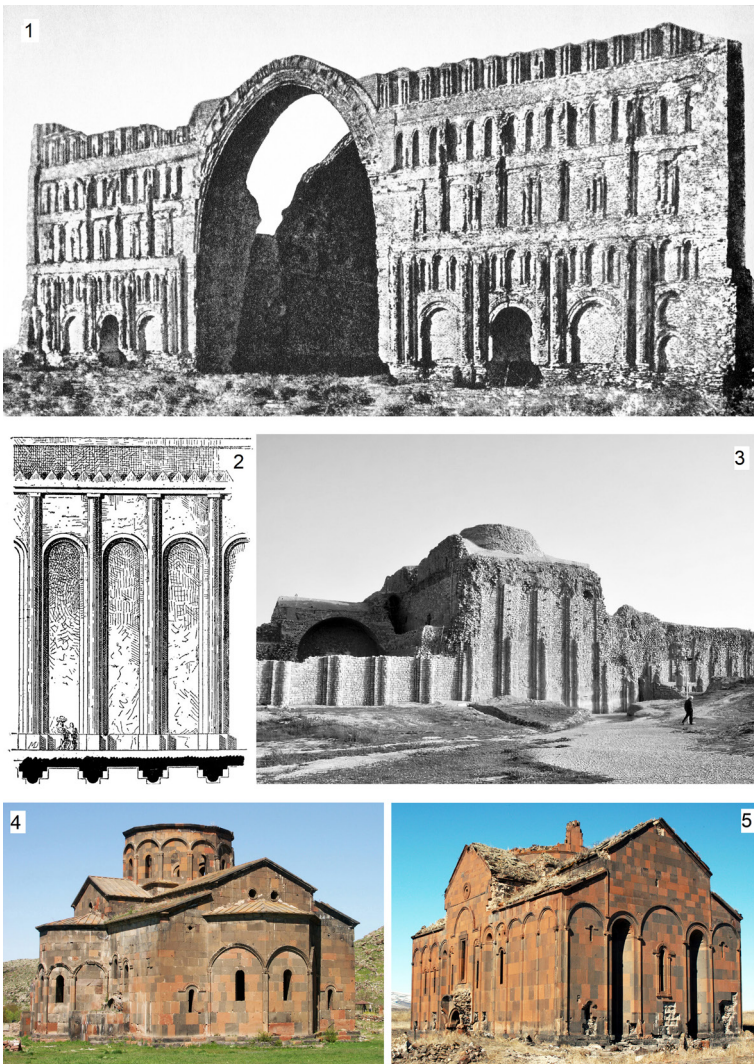


Figure 3 Possible Sassanian contribution to Armenian blind arcade. 3.1 Ctesiphon/Taq-e Kisra palace (third or sixth c.). Photo Jane Dieulafoy (1881); 3.2 Firuzabad, castle of king Ardachir (3rd c.). Reconstruction by Marcel Dieulafoy (1884-89); 3.3 Firuzabad, castle of king Ardachir (third c.). Online photo Livius (cropped); 3.4 Talin Cathedral, Armenia (probl. 689-93). Photo PD; 3.5. Ani Cathedral, Armenia (present-day Turkey) (989-1001). Photo PD

3.4 Stepped Pedestal

The principle of progressively elevating the volume of a sanctuary towards the sky, towards the divine, through successively receding steps or platforms, corresponds to an aspiration common to many ancient cultures, as witnessed by Egyptian pyramids and Mesopotamian ziggurats. The reduction of this graduated elevation and its application to the crepidoma alone, to the sole platform supporting a temple or a mausoleum, was also a natural evolution that we observe in both classical (western) and Iranian antiquity, for example in Greek and Roman temples, and under Achaemenid mausoleums (Cyrus's, in particular – Ghirshman 1963, 135-6, fig. 185).

In Armenia, the principle of the stepped crepidoma [fig. 4] was already present, in a partial version, at the entrance to the Garni temple (probably first c. CE). A complete crepidoma existed in some memorial churches of the first Christian centuries (Tekor, Yereruyk, Echmiadzin, Zvartnots – Donabédian 2008, 45, 49, 51, 54-6, 191-2). In early Christian and medieval Armenia, the subsequent reduction of the crepidoma gave rise to two new features. The first is the construction of several steps (usually three) at the bottom of all church walls. These steps no longer belonged to a platform beneath the building,²³ but merely widened the outer foot of the walls and, to a lesser extent, consolidated them. The second is a pedestal with a few steps (often three, sometimes much more), under the cruciferous quadrilateral stelae and columns that were widespread in the fifth to seventh centuries [figs 4.3-5] (Tchakerian 2016).²⁴ It is precisely in this last area that a Sassanian contribution can be envisaged.

In this vast context, a Sassanian element, apparently secondary, can perhaps claim a certain role in the choice, by Armenian patrons and artists, of stepped pedestals under cruciferous stelae and columns. These are the fire altars, within the fire temples that covered the Sassanid kingdom and the countries submitted to its authority, including Armenia. Now, these fire altars, of which the Sassanian coins, from third to seventh century, give many images, rested on a pillar preceded by a stepped base, generally with two or three steps [fig. 4.1] (Overlaet 1993, 294-9). There were also votive monuments in Sassanian Persia in the form of a column on a pedestal, again with three steps. An example of this is given by the monument to king Shapur I (240-272) at Bishapur (266) [fig. 4.2] (Ghirshman 1962, 151, fig. 194).

²³ These steps at the foot of the walls are often mistakenly considered to be part of the building's basement.

²⁴ The same principle appeared from the ninth century onwards on pedestals of *khachkar* plaques.

Through the fire altars erected in the fire temples forcibly built in Armenia, as well as through the Sassanian coins, the model of this type of base must have been well known in Armenia. It could therefore be reproduced by local Christian craftsmen under columns and stelae crowned with a cross. Nevertheless, inspiration could also come from other sources, including local ones.

4 Sassanian Iconographic Themes in Armenian Architecture and Art

The impact of Sassanian iconographic themes on architectural decoration and figurative art of early Christian and medieval Armenia [figs 5 to 10], as well as on that of Georgia and Caucasian Albania, has been the subject of several observations in numerous publications during the twentieth century,²⁵ and of systematic and detailed studies in recent years.²⁶ In the first group were mainly considered details of architectural ornamentation (e.g. denticulated bands, cornices with small arches), technical aspects of sculpted decoration, certain figures on quadrilateral stelae and some themes such as Daniel between lions and hunting figures. Some works devoted to the church of Aghtamar paid a particular attention to the Sassanian roots of its numerous sculptures (Der Nersessian 1965, 25-35; Orbeli 1968, 113-17). In more recent studies, in-depth analyses of iconography and semantics have been devoted mainly to animal subjects (real and fantastic animals, including the famous *Senmurv*), plant motifs and attributes-objects (wings, ribbons, necklaces, wreaths...). In a recent article, a strong emphasis has been rightly placed on the considerable impact of the Greco-Roman or Hellenistic heritage from which the Sassanid and Armenian arts have equally benefited (including the sphere of geometric ornaments) in iconography, style and even semantics (Mikayelyan 2023). At the same time, its author observes a common evolution of these two arts towards stylization and geometrization, which distanced them ever more from the Greco-Roman fidelity to nature.

25 Only some of them are mentioned in this short essay: Strzygowski 1918, 1: 411; 2: 687, 695, 718; Baltrušaitis 1929, XI [foreword by H. Focillon], 43-9, 55-8, 65-6; Toramanyan, T. 1942, 23-4, 86, 87, 212-13; Yovsepyan 1944, 14, 28, 31, 62-4, 69, 71, 74, 77, 104, 106, 116, 123; Chubinashvili 1948, 145, 164, 1761; Arakelyan 1949, 29, 46-7, 54-7, 61, 65, 67-9, 85; Grabar 1966, 32-6; Silvi Antonini 1977, 449; De Maffei 1968, 27-9; Thierry 1971, 56-7, 66, 69, 77; Der Nersessian 1977, 55, 75. A brief synthesis in Donabédian 1991b, 131-4.

26 See Compareti 2010; 2014; Mikayelyan 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; Hakobyan, Mikayelyan 2018; Asutay-Effenberger, Daim 2019; Iamanidze 2019; Kazaryan, Mikayelyan 2019; Mikayelyan 2022; 2023; 2026.

Only the main motifs from the mentioned categories, with only a few examples, will be evoked here, briefly, since this large subject has already been dealt with at length. Before turning to them, we shall remind that the propagation of the Persian models, as one may suppose, could use the channel of ‘minor’ Sassanian works, such as metal dishes, vases (Iamanidze 2019, 101), and fabrics, very appreciated in a large part of the known medieval world.



Figure 4 Sassanian and Armenian stepped pedestals. 4.1-2: Sassanian. 4.1 Fire altars on Sassanian gold dinars (fourth-fifth cc.). Photos Bruno Overlaet (1993, 296-9); 4.2 Bishapur, monument to king Shapur I (266). Online photo Flickr. 4.3-5: Armenian. Photos PD. 4.3 Oshakan, memorial column (ca. fifth-sixth cc.); 4.4 Odzun, memorial monument with two stelae (ca. seventh c.); 4.5 Gogaran, cross-topped monument, reconstructed from various elements (ca. sixth-seventh cc.)

4.1 Prestigious Scenes with Kings and Princes: The Magi

Attention is first drawn to several works of Christian Armenian sculptors and painters probably inspired by prestigious scenes with a Sassanian king or prince, grouped princes, or a hunter on horseback or on foot. One of the most impressive images illustrating the penetration of such Sassanian motifs into Christian Armenian pictorial culture is the scene of the Adoration of the Magi in one of the four oldest (sixth or seventh c.) illuminations of the Echmiadzin Gospel, where the Magi are represented like Sassanian kings and princes [fig. 5.1]. This is particularly noticeable in the posture of the Magi, knees apart and heels together, but also, according to Sirarpie Der Nersessian, in their dress and the head of one of them, depicted in profile (Der Nersessian 1969, 139-40; 1973, 501; 1977, 75). Let us add that long Sassanian ribbons are attached to the cap of this same figure.

It is likely that Christian artists intended, by these references to the glory of Sassanid kingdom, to emphasize the significance of the visit to the divine child, of the Magi “coming from the East” (Matthew, 2:1).²⁷

4.2 Shared Clothing Traditions

Nina Garsoïan made very interesting observations regarding the perfect correspondence between Sassanian representations and fifth-century Armenian texts, illustrating the community of customs, traditions, and even ideology between the two noble classes (Garsoïan 1997, 19-24). We will mention below the hunting scenes, especially on horseback, as one of the testimonies of the common way of life and mentality between Armenian and Sassanid noblemen. Traits of kinship are also present in clothing.

Some elements of costumes of the South Caucasian aristocracy are known to us from the pre-Arab period, thanks to several sculptures. The majority of these pieces of costume (in which the prophet Daniel – in the scene where he stands between two lions – is sometimes dressed) are characteristic of the clothing of Persian aristocracy. This is the case of the heavy cloak with long sleeves hanging empty, corresponding to the *kandys* of the Medes, still worn by the Sassanids, as well as of the tunic with long puffed flanks and arched bottoms, depicted in

²⁷ The representation of the Magi like Sassanid princes is an old and enduring tradition. It is also attested, at about the same time (sixth century) as the Armenian miniature, on a famous mosaic of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, where their 'Sassanian origin' is evidenced by the dress and caps of the Magi.

Jvari, Ateni (Iberia), Mren and on many quadrilateral stelae [figs 5.2, 5.3].²⁸ The same is true for straight or baggy trousers (the Echmiadzin miniature, Ateni, Jvari, Ptghni, Odzun stelae) and boots that widen at the calf level (Jvari, Mren, possibly Pemzashen, several stelae and a fragment of a plaque from Zvartnots).²⁹

Similar communalities can be observed on headgears. For example the rounded helmet or cap is equally widespread in images of both nobilities members. On the western lintel of Mren church, Christina Maranci has identified a Sassanian *spangelhelm* (segmented helmet) on the head of the right-side donor (prince Davit Saharuni) (Maranci 2015, 61-3). We will examine the attributes often added to the headgears later.

It is important to note that most of the Armenian and south Caucasian sculptures concerned are works created after 628-30, a time when the Persian influence had almost lost its political support. This shows how strong the ancestral ties with Persia/Iran remained.

4.3 Hunter on Horseback (or on Foot)

Hunting, the favourite occupation of Persian kings and princes (as well as banquet), is a frequent motif in Sassanian iconography with hunters often depicted on horseback, and sometimes on foot (Harper 1978) [figs 5.4-6]. Such images were obviously intended to glorify the depicted figures and to highlight their prestige by extolling their courage and strength. The theme is also recurrent in Armenian sculpture, both architectural and on small forms, since early Christian period³⁰ up to late Middle Ages/Modern Times.

The earliest Christian Armenian examples of such scenes include sculptures from Aghtsk, Kasagh, Ptghni (Donabédian 2008, 22-3, 124-5). Given not only the theme, which existed already in Greco-Roman art,³¹ but also several specific features (showing the rider and his mount in a 'flying gallop') and attributes (ribbons, knotted tail³²) characteristic of Persian art, it is generally accepted that such images, especially those of hunters on horseback, have a Sassanian source [fig. 5.4]. In addition,

²⁸ Thierry (1971, 60-5); Donabédian (2008, 108-9, 180-1, 183); Maranci (2015, 63-67).

²⁹ Nina Garsoïan (1997, 17; [2004] 2018) noted: "On the numerous surviving steles Armenian noblemen invariably wear the typical Parthian trousers and characteristic tunic with longer pointed sides as late as the seventh century CE".

³⁰ The same is true for Iberia/Georgia: see Iamanidze 2019, 101.

³¹ Trinquier, Vendries (2009). Regarding the hunter on foot, Sirarpie Der Nersessian notes that this was already a well-known theme of Hellenistic funerary iconography and attested in Armenia itself on engraved seals. See Der Nersessian 1969, 120; 1977, 63.

³² On horses' knotted tail, symbol of power, derived from warriors rituals, see Iamanidze (2019, 102).

as noted above, they reflect a common way of life between Sassanid and Armenian nobilities in Late Antiquity.

One of the most remarkable hunting scenes is sculpted on the western façade of St. Sion of Ateni (Georgia), a church build by Armenian masons (probably mid-seventh c. (Donabédian 2008, 182-4); some authors attribute the sculpture to the tenth c.).³³ It presents a prince on horseback – note the Sassanian ribbon floating behind his head, and the knotted tail of his horse depicted in the attitude of flying gallop [fig. 5.4.2]. The princely hunter draws his bow at three deer, one of which is about to be hit by an arrow, while the second, seized with surprise, turns its head towards the assailant.³⁴ At Ptghni (ca. mid-seventh c.), the horseman (here also the horse has a knotted tail) shooting an arrow at a lion is accompanied by an inscription which names him: Manuel, lord of the Amatunis [fig. 5.4.3].³⁵ Further on the right, a man on foot spears a lion [fig. 5.4.4]. It is proposed to see in these two figures the ancestors of the church's donors, Manuel and his father Parkev Amatuni, who died as heroes in 389 (Donabédian 2008, 124).³⁶ Many other representations of this theme are present from the tenth century onwards, and the subject shows great longevity.

Most of these scenes are related to the funerary domain, which is why they can be seen at the bottom of medieval cross plaques known as *khachkar*, often standing near tombs. They are particularly frequent on the lower part of thirteenth century *khachkars* from Artsakh/Mountainous Karabagh [fig. 5.5]. As Hamlet Petrosyan explains, these images reflect the heavy fate of the local princes, who sacrificed themselves in the war campaigns led by their Mongol lords, to ensure the security of their domains and the survival of the populations living there (Petrosyan 2008, 300-3). At the beginning, real fight scenes were depicted, for example against a big cat. Then, the funerary theme was reinforced, and in particular on *khachkars* of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century from the cemetery of Jugha/Julfa (the largest cemetery with *khachkars* of medieval Armenia, entirely destructed by Azerbaijani authorities), the noble

³³ Aladashvili (1977, 42, 46), although in favour of a seventh century dating, cites (42, fn. 44) the opinion of G. Abramishvili in favour of dating the sculpture during the restoration of the church in the tenth century.

³⁴ Description and brief study (followed by that of the neighboring Senmurv) by Aladashvili (1977, 41-7). See also Chubinashvili 1948, 164; Donabédian 2008, 183-4.

³⁵ See Yovsepean 1944, 14, 28; Arakelyan 1949, 66-8; Der Nersessian 1969, 125; 1977, 55.

³⁶ A detailed analysis of these reliefs is given by Maranci (2015, 208-220).

hunter of the Middle Ages was replaced by a notable or a merchant holding a cross instead of a spear or a bow [fig. 5.6].³⁷

4.3.1 A Parenthesis: Iranianizing *khachkars* of Old Julfa

While we are mentioning the late medieval *khachkars* of the Jugha/Julfa cemetery (province of Nakhichevan, since 1921 part of the Republic of Azerbaijan), an exceptional phenomenon must be highlighted, which concerns the form and decoration of these plaques. Until the great deportation of the Armenians to Iran by Shah Abbas I in 1604-05, the numerous *khachkars* which were produced in Old Jugha city³⁸ during the last decades of sixteenth and the first years of the seventeenth century obeyed a totally new type, proper to this precise place and period. This original type of *khachkar* was marked notably by unusually slender proportions and by a series of Islamizing traits [fig. 5.6]. Some of them were already well-known on Armenian monuments, and in particular on this type of plaque, since the end of the twelfth century, for example the rows of eight-pointed stars, the intricate interlacing and the rich arabesques. But among them were also new elements and ornaments, such as high, deep and narrow niches covered with an ogee arch, and under the cross, in a square compartment separated from it, a circular bulging medallion decorated with a sophisticated arabesque (not to speak about the figuration of the donor/deceased, as mentioned above, holding a cross).³⁹ Because of these new and original features, and because of the city's close ties with Iran at the time, it seems appropriate to qualify those *khachkars* as 'Iranianizing'. However, they had to immortalize the last stay in this place of Iranophile Armenians

³⁷ See Ayvazyan 1984; 1987; 1990; Petrosyan 2008, 222-33.

³⁸ 'Old' in opposition to 'New Julfa', the name of the quarter that the deportees built in Isfahan.

³⁹ This is not the place to deal with another remarkable innovation specific to approximately, at least, two dozens of Old Jugha *khachkars* erected between the last decades of sixteenth c. and the deportation of 1604: the representation, at the top of the plaque, of a hybrid being "composed of a pair of confronted quadrupeds, bodies in profile merging into a single frontally facing and bearded human head" (Baltrušaitis, Kouymjian 1986, 36-42). Let us simply note that each half of the fabulous animal had a large semicircular wing which, together with the opposite symmetrical wing, formed a kind of halo surrounding the central human head. These wings are strongly reminiscent of those found on various animals in Sassanian art, which sometimes formed exactly the same kind of 'halo'.

who were going to be, in inhuman conditions, deported to Iran (see below).⁴⁰

The unique phenomenon of the Jugha *khachkars* can be seen as a forerunner of the architectural and decorative ‘revolution’ that would take place a few decades later in Iran itself, in Isfahan (see below).



Figure 5 Impact of Sassanian prestige images on Armenian art and architecture. 5.1 Echmiadzin Gospel, Adoration of Magi (ca. sixth-seventh cc.). Photo Matenadaran, ms 2374, fol. 229; 5.2 Mren Cathedral, donors on the western lintel (ca. 640). Photo PD; 5.3 Talin, fragment of a four-sided stela (ca. sixth-seventh cc.). Photo PD; 5.4 Four bas-reliefs of hunters: 5.4a Kasagh (ca. fifth c.); 5.4b Ateni, Georgia (seventh or tenth c.). Photos PD; 5.4c and 5.4d Ptghni, south façade, two extremities of a window arch. Photos Hrair Hawk Khatcherian; 5.5 Koshik, Artsakh/Mountainous Karabagh, *khachkar* (1203). Photo Samvel Karapetyan; 5.6 Jugha/Julfa, two *khachkars* now in Yerevan (1599) – photo Armenia History Museum, and in Echmiadzin (1602) – photo PD

40 A part of the Armenian population returned to Nakhichevan in the nineteenth c., but the local authorities of what became in the twentieth c. the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan would end up driving them out again. This ethnic cleansing was completed, between 1997 and 2009, now under the independent Republic of Azerbaijan, by the annihilation of the entire Armenian heritage of Nakhichevan (see Caucasus Heritage Watch 2022), and in particular by a total destruction of the immense Armenian cemetery at Jugha/Julfa, which contained thousands of *khachkars*, including hundreds of the Iranianizing type just mentioned (see Parliamentary Group Switzerland-Armenia 2006).

4.4 Grape Harvesting

Let us come back to early Middle Ages. The art historian Lilit Mikayelyan has highlighted the close relations that link the figurations of grape harvest in Sassanian and Armenian arts [fig. 6]. This kinship has its roots in the common antique Greco-Roman heritage where the grape harvest motif had a wide spread.⁴¹ Transposed into Christianity, the image of vine scrolls and the theme of grape harvest acquired a Christic, Eucharistic meaning and became the symbol of paradise and eternal life, deserving a wide popularity.

Early Armenian and pre-Arab examples of grape harvest figuration include the lintel fragment of Dvin (sixth-seventh cc.) (Donabédian 1991a, 275, 308, fig. 45) and probably the figures sculpted in the spandrels of the blind arcade on the Zvartnots cathedral's first story (mid-seventh c.) [figs 6.2, 6.3] (Donabédian 2008, 195-7, fig. 386; 223-4, fig. 436). Judging by the tools in the hands of the characters at Zvartnots, these images refer to the semantics mentioned in the gospels, that of the Kingdom of God compared to a vineyard, and the workers and winegrowers who may be worthy of it or be cast out. Later, a famous example is the long vine scroll sculpted on the upper part of the façades of the Holy Cross of Aghtamar (915-21), all around it. The vine scroll houses a wide variety of scenes, some of which are related to the grape harvest [fig. 6.4]. Many are enigmatic in such a context, like the scenes of hand-to-hand combat or of confrontation between a man and a bear.

In Sassanian art, the vintage motif is frequent, in particular on sixth-seventh centuries silver vases [fig. 6.1]. Both arts have inherited from antiquity the same disproportion between bunches of grapes, which are hypertrophied, and human figures, which are significantly reduced. In both cases, the scrolls are inhabited, of course, by grape-pickers, but also by many birds and animals, which symbolize, in Christian context, the souls of the righteous who access paradise and eternal life through the saving sacrifice of Christ. Despite the religious differences between Persians and Armenians, Lilit Mikayelyan invites us to observe a profound iconographic and semantic concordance, based on a probable common paradigm that sees the vine and the grape harvest as symbols of eternal life.

⁴¹ See Mikayelyan 2016; 2023, 72-5; Kazaryan, Mikayelyan 2019.



Figure 6 Grape harvesting in Sassanian and Armenian art and architecture. 6.1 Sassanian silver vase (ca. sixth-seventh c.), British Museum. Photo Bruno Overlaet (1993, 240, pl. 89); 6.2-4: Armenian bas-reliefs. 6.2 Dvin, fragment of a lintel (ca. fifth-seventh c.). Photo Armenia History Museum; 6.3 Zvartnots Cathedral, spandrel of the main blind arcade (ca. 650). Photo PD; 6.4 Aghtamar, Holy Cross church (915-21), south façade, eastern part of the vine scroll. Photo Zaven Sargsyan

4.5 Fantastic Animals

Several Sassanian images of animals have also left their mark on Armenian (and Georgian) sculpted (and painted) decoration [fig. 7]. This includes both fantastic and real animals, fighting against each other, or imposing their power, like predatory birds holding their prey in their talons.

4.5.1 The ‘Pseudo-*Senmurv*’

Among fantastic animals, the so-called *Simurgh* or *Senmurv* – or better, according to Compareti (2019, 17), ‘pseudo-*Senmurv*’ – mainly with a protome of a dog and a body, wings and tail of a bird,⁴¹ most often of a peacock,⁴² is one of the emblematic examples of the spread of Iranian iconography in the medieval Christian (and Muslim) world [figs 7.1-3].

The identification and interpretation of the motif has undergone an evolution from the twentieth century to our days, which has been studied by Matteo Compareti (2006; 2019), and summarized by Hakobyan, Mikayelyan (2018, 40), and by Kazaryan, Mikayelyan (2019, 80-1). It is more or less admitted today that the significance of the ‘pseudo-*Senmurv*’ corresponded, in Sassanian culture, to the concept of *xwarrah* or *farr(ah)*, the divine glory, fortune and divine mandate given to the Sassanid kings. Note that it is from *farr(ah)* that the Armenian name for glory, *p’ark’*, comes (Atjaryan 1979, 482-3; Garsoïan 1989, 552 s.v. *p’ark’*). About the ‘transcendental glory’ of *xwarrah* and its transposition into Christian context, Nina Garsoïan wrote: “With the Christianization of Armenia this royal supernatural quality was transferred to God and His saints”. It is thus probable that, transposed to the decoration of Christian sanctuaries, the pseudo-*Simurgh/Senmurv* kept approximately the same meaning, of divine protection and glory.⁴³

In Armenian and Georgian architectural sculpture and painting, one can mention several examples of this motif [figs 7.1-3], notably on the drum of Echmiadzin cathedral⁴⁴ and on the western façade of Ateni church (seventh or tenth cc.) (Iamanidze 2019, 97), as well as,

⁴² The Armenian word for peacock, *Siramarg* (in certain dialects *Sinamarg*), according to Atjaryan (1979, 219), is borrowed possibly from diverse Iranian words, all linked with Persian *Simurgh*.

⁴³ Garsoïan (1989, 552, s.v. *p’ark’*); Donabédian (2008, 183). On the symbolism and semantics of the pseudo-*Senmurv* and its transfer to the West, in connection with a ninth-century Venetian mosaic, see also Riccioni (2024, 60-3).

⁴⁴ First time published and studied by Kazaryan (2007, 89-90 and 97, fig. 86), with a presumed dating to the sixth-seventh centuries, then more precisely to ca. 620, notably in Kazaryan, Mikayelyan (2019, 81, fig. 6, our fig. 7.1).

much later, on one of the mural paintings of the Ani church of Tigran Honents (thirteenth c.).⁴⁵

4.5.2 Other Fabulous Animals

Representations of various fantastic animals, very probably borrowed from Sassanian works of art or inspired by them, can be found on numerous pieces of medieval Armenian and Georgian art [figs 7.4-8]. Particularly impressive are the richness and diversity of the bestiary carved on the façades of the Holy Cross of Aghtamar (Vaspurakan, 915-21, southern Armenia, today eastern Turkey) [figs 7.4a, 7.5]. The majority of these imaginary creatures are interpreted as apotropaic symbols, and are presumed to express and manifest the divine protection expected for the neighboring human figures. Such was the Aghtamar sculptor's taste for fabulous animal combinations of Persian origin that he transformed the whale of Jonah's story into a monster "derived from the Persian *Senmurv*" (Der Nersessian 1965, 33; see also Kazaryan, Mikayelyan 2019, 82) and gave it a magnificent, purely Sassanian, double-curved wing [fig. 7.5]. Another Sassanian feature, a garland of pearls, is also present on the wing, marking its lower contour on the body of the whale (see below the passage devoted to attributes).

Some of the fantastic animals with Sassanian roots, present on medieval Armenian and Georgian monuments, seem to be loaded with a specific significance uniting force, majesty and wildness or mystery. One of them is the griffin, a hybrid creature combining a lion's body with a bird's head, wings and tail. Imposing examples are carved on Aghtamar (915-21) and Samtavisi (Georgia, 1030) churches [fig. 7.4]. Another one is the sphinx – a winged lion, with a human head and bust, whose image is sculpted on eleventh and thirteenth centuries monuments [fig. 7.6].

All these images passed also from Sassanian to Islamic repertoire, then to western European art, thus becoming common to Armenian-Georgian, Muslim and European decorative vocabularies. Conversely, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, who had firstly shed light on the Sassanian origin of several of these creatures and of their modes of representation in Armenian and Georgian arts (Baltrušaitis 1929), then looked for much older Middle Eastern roots to these compositions by returning to Sumer, thus revealing their great

⁴⁵ For other examples and more detailed analyses, see Hakobyan, Mikayelyan (2018, 41-6).

antiquity (Baltrušaitis 1934), curiously without stressing – in that study – the intermediary role obviously played by Sassanian art.⁴⁶

From the point of view precisely of the intermediary role attributed to Sassanian models, the motif of the whale in Jonas' story is significant. In a study devoted to the fabulous cetacean *ketos* of Greco-Roman antiquity, which entered the Christian repertoire to represent the whale that swallowed and then spat out the prophet Jonah, Stefano Riccioni examined the variations and metamorphoses undergone by the image of this aquatic monster (Riccioni 2016). Among them, he observed the canine or leonine shape acquired by its head and anterior paws, and the transformation of its lateral fins into wings. In this regard, Riccioni explored the relationship between the whale of Aghtamar in Armenia (915-21) and those represented on the ambos of the cathedrals of Ravello and Minturno in Campania (eleventh-twelfth cc.), searching possible Sassanian roots for the three of them and more precisely an influence of the *Senmurv* (Riccioni 2016, 141-2). He rightly highlighted the deep Greco-Etrusco-Roman antique roots of the various versions of the monster, thus counterbalancing the hypothesis of a contamination by Sassanian representations, while not completely excluding it. Indeed, both the 'S'-shaped double curvature of the wing in the three pictures and the pearled crescent at its bottom at Aghtamar and Minturno (see below our remarks on these two traits) leave little doubt about the Sassanian origin of this figuration, even if its transmission could have happened later, via Islamic works.

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that many combinations of the same elements had already taken place in a distant Middle-Eastern and Greco-Roman antiquity, from which subsequent cultures, both in the West and the East, have equally inherited.

46 This omission is all the more surprising that J. Baltrušaitis published a little later a study devoted to Sassanian stucco: Baltrušaitis (1938-39).



Figure 7 Fabulous animals on Armenian churches, inspired by Sassanian models. 7.1-3: Pseudo-*Senmurv* in Armenian sculpture and painting. 7.1 Echmiadzin Cathedral, northern side of the drum (seventh or tenth-seventeenth cc.). Photo A. Kazaryan and L. Mikayelyan; 7.2 Ateni (Georgia), St Sion church, west façade (seventh or tenth c.). Photo PD; 7.3 Ani, St Gregory of Tigran Honents (1215). Photo PD; 7.4 Griffin: 7.4a Aghtamar, Armenia (present-day Turkey), Holy Cross church (915-21), south façade. Photo Zaven Sargsyan; 7.4b Samtavisi, Georgia, eastern façade of the church (1030). Photo PD; 7.5 Aghtamar, Holy Cross church (915-21), south façade. Jonas' whale «contaminated» by the Sassanian pseudo-*Senmurv*; 7.6 Sphinx on Armenian churches. Photos PD: 7.6a Haritj monastery, eastern façade of main church (1201), south extremity; 7.6b Makaravank monastery, western portal of the narthex (before 1224)

4.6 Predatory Quadrupeds and Birds

The motif of a predatory quadruped attacking another animal [figs 8.1 to 8.6], frequent in Sassanian art since its beginning (again with much older roots), was also present in early Christian Armenia since the fourth century (mausoleum of Aghtsk, impost of Tzob...). Given the similarity of compositions, a Sassanian origin or kinship seems likely. Together with the image of a bird grasping its prey in its talons, it became quite common in Armenian architectural sculpture of the tenth-fourteenth centuries.

In the medieval context, these motifs have often been interpreted as heraldic symbols, i.e. the coat of arms of princely families [figs 8.2-6]. However, in medieval Armenia, the same composition is often found on monuments built by different dynasties, which contradicts the

obligatory notion of a single symbol specific to each family (Avetisyan 2023, 33-4). It therefore seems more plausible to attribute to such figurations a more general symbolism, which may be common to all dynasties. It could be, for example, the glorification of princely power as a whole. Thanks to the presence of its sign on the façade of a church, this power was both placed under divine protection and reinforced in the eyes of the local community.

For the early Christian period, another interpretation, based on a paradigm common in the Psalms, might probably be more appropriate - such an image could symbolize the dangers that threaten sinners and from which believers ask God to be delivered (Donabédian 1991a, 272-4). This meaning is particularly clear when the pictures of attack by a wild cat are contrasted with peaceful scenes from which they are separated by the cross. The right jamb of the door of the Aghtsk mausoleum (years 364-68) is quite enlightening in this regard [fig. 8.1].

It is possible that this motif changed its symbolism in the Middle Ages and acquired, as suggested above, a little more profane meaning of an image of strength and power against enemies, thanks to divine protection. But clearly, the previously imagined heraldic function seems very unlikely.

4.7 Row or Group of Birds in Circles, and Row of Sassanian-style Ewers

Another theme frequent in Sassanian decorative repertoire and present on one Armenian church of the seventh century is the row or group of birds in circular medallions [figs 8.7, 8.8]. In Persia, it appears on Sassanian stucco plaques, silver vases (carafes, flasks), dishes and fabrics.⁴⁷

In Armenia it can be seen only once, in a rather unusual disposition: on the left part of a pair of arches that surmount two paired windows, on the northern façade of Ptghni church, western part (mid-seventh c.) (Donabédian 2008, 124-5). Two rows of birds converge towards a central medallion featuring a cross pattée (fig. 8.7 - only the right part is visible). This depiction is likely an original interpretation of the motif of the two doves approaching the cross, symbolizing the souls' aspiration for salvation. But it also seems to be 'contaminated' by Sassanian artifacts. However, instead of Persian medallions, each of the birds is placed under a small horseshoe arche (very close to a circle), all the arches forming a row on the arched band above

⁴⁷ See for example Trever, Lukonin 1987, 115, n° 27, figs. 79-83; 116-7, n° 32, figs. 98; Overlaet 1993, 155, n° 13; 218, n° 70; 278-9, n° 129.

the left-side window.⁴⁸ At Ptghni, the birds include pheasants, quail, doves, partridges, ducks, geese, peacocks and eaglets.

It is true that the depiction of birds and other animals in vine tendrils is a common motif in early Christian art, especially in the Holy Land mosaics, with an obvious paradisiacal symbolism. One example is the mosaic from Jerusalem, previously in a Chapel near Damascus Gate, now transferred in the Mardigian Museum of the Armenian Patriarchate. On this impressive pavement, probably the work of local artists, but crowned with a beautiful Armenian inscription (ca. sixth c.),⁴⁹ one of the earliest uses of the Mashtots alphabet, more than forty birds are depicted. These may symbolize the souls of deceased Armenians “whose names the Lord knows”, as indicated by the inscription.

Nevertheless, by the species of birds and their diversity, as well as by their disposition inside circles (or almost so), the Armenian formula of Ptghni is very close to Sassanian works.⁵⁰ The presence of this window arch with very likely Sassanian kinship is certainly not a coincidence. Indeed the church of Ptghni shows a close relationship with the Sassanian heritage since, in addition to the mentioned row of birds and to the two hunting princes [figs 5.4c, 5.4d], it has an exceptional row of carafes/ewers with clear Sassanian affinities.

On the western part of the north façade of the church, just above the birds arch, a row of sixty (!) vases is carved [fig. 8.8]. This is the only known case in Armenia of vases arranged in a horizontal row on a cornice at the top of a façade (Donabédian 2008, 256). The vases present both a certain diversity and homogeneity. Belonging more or less to the type of wine jug called in Greek antiquity *oinochoe*, all are elongated, have a moderately rounded body and a narrow neck. Two subtypes can be identified, one in the shape of a simple vase, without handle, a kind of bottle as we see many in Sassanian toreutics, and the other with a handle and a pointed spout, a shape very characteristic of some of the most elegant Sassanian silver carafes/ewers. All those belonging to the second subtype are turned to the left, which seems to show a general sacred orientation of the whole row.

48 It was certainly intended that the series of birds would continue on the right arched band. However, the sculpture remained unfinished. It is noticeable that the surface of the flat spaces under the small horseshoe arches on the right is at a higher level than on the left row: it was also scheduled to be carved.

49 Based on comparisons with similar local works, Sirarpie Der Nersessian (1977, 67-71) suggests dating the mosaic to the sixth century. For his part, based on an epigraphic study, Serge Mouraviev (2010, 123) places the inscription in the second half of the fifth century. Michael Stone, the best expert on Armenian inscriptions in Jerusalem, leans toward a dating in the sixth century (Stone 2002, 216-17).

50 Having studied in detail this row of birds at Ptghni, Christina Maranci (2015, 220-8) also considers possible a link with Sassanian decorations.

As to the meaning of this ‘decoration’, Nikolai Tokarskii suggests that liturgical vessels are depicted (Tokarskii 1971, 146). We can expand on his thought by adding: with an Eucharistic symbolism (whence their orientation towards the east). This is probably also the case for the vases of a very similar type carved in the eleventh century on the altar elevation of the Tsakhats Kar church (province of Vayots Dzor, Republic of Armenia) (Donabédian 2008, 256, fn. 145; Maranci 2015, 230, fig. 3.24). In her study of the Ptghni cornice, concerning its semantics, Christina Maranci adopts the Eucharistic hypothesis and very pertinently adds to it the notion of ceremonial banquet, which was, at the Sassanian court, a mark of prestige, as well as that of funeral banquet, which was cited in early Christian Armenian sources (and is still practiced – more modestly – today) (Maranci 2015, 233-5).



Figure 8 Predatory animals, birds and ewers on Armenian monuments, inspired by Sassanian models.

8.1 Aghtz, mausoleum of the Arsacids, right jamb of the door (364-8). Photo PD; 8.2 Aghtamar, church of the Holy Cross (915-21), south façade. Photo Hrair Hawk Khatcherian; 8.3 Sb Geghard/Holy Lance monastery, Prroshians' mausoleum (1283), north wall. Photo Hrair Hawk Khatcherian; 8.4 Sb Geghard/Holy Lance monastery. South façade of the main church (1215). Photo Hrair Hawk Khatcherian; 8.5 Makaravank monastery, west portal of the narthex (before 1224); 8.6 Sb Geghard/Holy Lance monastery. South façade of the main church (1215), portal. Photo PD; 8.7 Ptghni, church (640s), northern façade, western part. Double arch above the last pair of windows. Photo Zaven Sargsyan; 8.8 Ptghni, church (640s), northern façade, western part. Lower cornice, row of ewers. Photo Zaven Sargsyan

4.8 Plant Motifs

As Lilit Mikayelyan has shown in her articles, close links exist between Sassanian and Armenian representations of plant motifs (based on Greco-Roman models), in particular the leaves of acanthus and palmette (the same concerns, to a certain extent, the vine stock and fleur-de-lys motifs) (Mikayelyan 2015; 2023). For his part, the author of these lines suggests considering the S-shaped, double-curved design of the leaves at the foot of certain Sassanian and Armenian figures, a design also found on the wings that often accompany images of Sassanian princes, as well as animals. In early Christian Iberian sculpture, Nina Iamanidze has observed a widespread use of the Sassanian motif of the tulip in the hand of a noble figure, aimed at emphasizing her or his high rank (Iamanidze 2019, 98-100).

4.8.1 Acanthus Leaf, Palmette, Half-palmette

The acanthus and palmette motifs [fig. 9], which have deep antique roots, were widely used by Sassanian and Armenian artists of the early Christian centuries. In both traditions, these motifs, often very close to each other, received similar stylizations and uses. For example, they are similarly arranged in a horizontal row, attached to each other at their feet by concentric curved fluting, at the edge of Sassanian vessels and on Armenian window arches (Talin cathedral, seventh c. – fig. 9.2). The same ornament, more schematized, once present on Sanahin monastery's main church (Armenia, 966-72 – fig. 9.3), was in turn widely used in the tenth-eleventh centuries on the churches of the Tayk/Tao province, west of Armenia, south-west of Georgia.

In the same way, very similar scrolls of half-palmettes in alternating arrangements (facing successively upwards and downwards) can be found on Sassanian toreutics and stuccos, as well as on Armenian window arches (Penzashen – fig. 9.1 – and Zoravar churches, seventh c.). Finally, according to a formula inherited from Hellenistic and late Roman art, in both traditions, the acanthus/palmette is often placed at the base, in support of a figure, a person of royal rank in Persia, saints and princes involved in religious history, in Armenia. This is notably the case at the foot of several crosses and cruciferous quadrilateral stelae of Armenia [figs 9.4 to 9.11].

Sassanian-Armenian parallels are not limited to iconography and stylistics, but as Lilit Mikayelyan points out, also concern semantics and symbolism. In both traditions, the acanthus and the palmette have more or less the same meaning, linked to notions of triumph, prestige, sacredness, as well as victory over death, eternal life and paradise. In the East, since antiquity, the palm tree has represented the tree of life (Mikayelyan 2015, 226; 2023, 70). This is why, to symbolize the

saving and life-giving power of the cross, half-palmettes often grow from its foot or base in Armenian art.

4.8.2 Leaves (and wings) with S-Shaped pattern

Among Sassanian plant motifs, the S-shaped pattern of the pair of curved leaves under some animals [pl. 9], very close to that of the pair of wings on the kings' and princes' crowns and, again, on certain animals, may have played a decisive role in the elaboration of an important symbolic and decorative Armenian composition. The paradigm of the life-giving cross manifests itself very naturally in early Christian art (in general) by the representation of vegetable shoots 'growing' from the foot of the cross. In Armenia, probably not earlier than in the fifth c. (the dates are uncertain at this high period), these shoots very often take the form of two leaves (half-palmettes, as we wrote above) symmetrically curved in an S [figs 9.4, 9.7 to 9.11, 9.15]. On many Armenian examples which are probably not prior the fifth-sixth centuries, the S curvature is not complete.⁵¹ The design is really clear on pieces obviously belonging to the seventh century.⁵² Under some crosses of the seventh century (Agarak, Arutj and Ptghni in Armenia, Tsromi in Georgia), there is not one pair of S-shaped leaves, but two pairs, superimposed.

In all probability, the double curvature of the leaves and wings appeared in Persia since the beginning of the Sassanid period. Consequently, it likely predates the S-shape of the Armenian leaves. If this is indeed the case, it could be the origin of the Armenian motif. Such a presumed legacy is all the more important that the same pattern was transmitted, some centuries later, from the mid-ninth century, to the *khachkar*, a type of sacred artefact emblematic of Armenian faith and identity. Above-mentioned examples of Sassanian S-shaped wing on Armenian and Italian representations of Jonas' whale from the tenth-twelfth centuries confirm the longevity of this paradigm.

⁵¹ For example: Dvin, capital of quadrilateral stela; Dvin, lintel, presumably of St. Gregory cathedral; Kasagh, lintel of the south façade, east side; Kasagh, impost of small engaged pilaster; Mughni, base of a quadrilateral stela, and the stela itself; Tigranakert of Artsakh, two carved images of a cross; Zovuni, lintel of mononave chapel.

⁵² For example: lintels of doors of Agarak, Bjni, Karenis, St. Hripsime (west), Voskepar, Zoravar of Yeghvard; Dvin, small stone cross from a quadrilateral stela; Dvin, capital with Christ's medallion on a cross; Talin, cubic base of a quadrilateral stela; Yereruyk, cubic base of a quadrilateral stela: under the cross of one of the four faces, the form is clearly designed, but on the opposite face, the leaves of the cross are not fully S-shaped.

4.9 Attributes and Geometric Ornaments

4.9.1 Ribbons, Wings, Necklaces, Wreaths, Crowns...

The ribbons and wings on Sassanian images of kings, princes and (probably sacred) animals, including birds, have massively migrated from Sassanian sculptures, silver plates and vases to early Christian Armenian and more generally south Caucasian figurations of donors⁵³ (eastern façade of St. Sion of Ateni) and their ancestors (in hunting scenes notably), crosses, animals and birds. Many figurations of crosses pattée in a medallion, with ribbons and sometimes wings rising from their foot can be found on capitals, lintels and stelae from that early period [figs 9.5 to 9.9]. Sassanian ribbons attached to birds' neck are also present on several capitals, impostes, bases and a clay plaque from early Christian Armenia [figs 9.12 to 9.14], Caucasian Albania (Aghouank) and Iberia, and still at the beginning of the tenth century, on cornices of Aghtamar Holy Cross church [fig. 9.15]. Some sculptors show an imaginative interpretation of the ribbon by having it go around the cross from above [figs 9.5, 9.6], in a deformation of the traditional medallion's ring. Some others combine ribbons and wings. On a fragment of impost (capital of an engaged pilaster) from Yereruyk, the artist has added a bunch of grapes to the end of a ribbon, itself attached to the neck of a stylized peacock [fig. 9.14].

Ribbons, necklaces, wreaths and crowns, heirs of antique near-eastern traditions, were widely used in Sassanian iconography, applied not only to high ranked personages, such as kings and princes,⁵⁴ but also to animals, both real and fantastic, and birds. According to Lilit Mikayelyan, they had a rich semantic and symbolic content. They allowed, on the one hand, to emphasize the prestige of the figures depicted, the extent of their power, and on the other hand, to create around the animals and birds endowed with these attributes, an aura of sacredness and protection (Mikayelyan 2022; 2025-6). The same attributes are very common in Armenian and Georgian sculpture of the sixth-fourteenth centuries, again on images of representatives of the ruling elite, and of real and fabulous animals and birds [fig. 7]. We mentioned earlier the Sassanian beaded garland that underlined the attachment of the curved wing on the body of Jonah's whale, at Aghtamar (915-21). Such rows of holes (pearls) are omnipresent on

⁵³ On the eastern façade of St. Sion church of Ateni, a shortened and rounded variation of a ribbon is attached to the helmet or cap of two patrons (who wear a kind of *kandys*).

⁵⁴ In this respect Nina Garsoïan (1997, 23; [2004] 2018) wrote eloquently "the hunting king, on horseback, wearing all his supernatural attributes - the halo, the crescent moon set on his crown, and the symbolic floating ribbons of the *xwarrah* - unmistakably displayed the full majesty of his glory".

animals and birds sculptures on Aghtamar's façades. Particularly popular in the Middle Ages, griffins, sirens and sphinxes were Sassanian necklaces and crowns. According to L. Mikayelyan, they were probably seen as messengers carrying a protection assured by the celestial world to which they belonged. Their presence over the centuries reveals the profound influence of the Sassanian artistic repertoire on Christian cultures of the South Caucasus.



Figure 9 Plant motifs, ribbons and wings on Armenian monuments. 9.1 Pemsashen, St George church (640s), north façade. Photo Hrair Hawk Khatcherian; 9.2 Talin Cathedral (probl. 689-93), western façade. Photo PD (1976); 9.3 Sanahin monastery, St Savior church (966-72), western façade. Survey by Shmavon Azatyan (1987, n° 7); 9.4 Sanahin monastery, capital-shaped upper part of a four-sided stela (ca. sixth-seventh cc.). Photo PD; 9.5-9: Five early Christian Armenian crosses with ribbons or double-curved wings/leaves. 9.5 Avan church near Ashtarak, south support of triumphal arch (ca. fifth-sixth cc.). Photo PD; 9.6 Tekor, St Sergius church (probl. 480s), west façade. Photo Nikolai Marr (probl. 1907); 9.7 Kasagh basilica. Impost with a cross flanked by two wings (ca. fifth-sixth cc.). Photo PD; 9.8 Tzitzernavank basilica. Cross pattée in a medallion with two lateral wings/half palmettes (ca. sixth-seventh cc.). Drawing after Murad Hasratian (2000, 114); 9.9 Mughni monastery, fragment of four-sided stela on cubic base, with crosses pattées flanked or preceded by two wings (ca. sixth-seventh cc.). Photo PD; 9.10 Voskepar, Holy Mother of God church (seventh c.). Lintel of south door. Photo PD; 9.11 Talin, eastern face of four-sided stela. Two S-shaped half-palmettes «growing» from the foot of a cross. Photo PD; 9.12 Aghtz, mausoleum of Arsacid kings. Brick plate (ca. fourth c.). Peacock with Sassanian ribbons attached to its neck and wings. Reconstruction from fragments by Aram Kalantaryan (1975); 9.13 Pashvants/Pashvatzk, Vaspurakan (present-day Turkey), single-nave church (ca. fifth-sixth cc.). Impost, image of an eagle or peacock bearing ribbons attached to its head and legs. Two photos by Chantal Hotellier and Zaven Sargsyan, adjusted by PD; 9.14 Yereruyk, impost (ca. sixth c.). Peacock to whose neck a Sassanian ribbon is attached, prolonged by a bunch of grapes. Photo PD; 9.15 Aghtamar, Holy Cross church (915-21), cornice of west façade. Therianthrope combining human head, bird's wings, and feline's legs, with Sassanian wings and ribbons. Photo Hrair Hawk Khatcherian

4.9.2 Geometric Ornaments

A Sassanian origin has been considered for a series of geometric ornaments sculpted (and for one of them, painted) on Armenian monuments of early Christian (fifth-sixth centuries), pre-Arab (seventh centuries), and for some of them, medieval periods [fig. 10]: row of small arches (which may come from the arcade hollowed out on the entrance arch of the palace of Ctesiphon), row of 'hearts', row of intersecting circles equivalent to a row of shuttles/almonds in an X shape, and for its horizontal half, to a row of shuttles/almonds in a zigzag pattern, very often with a bead lodged between them [fig. 10.1] (Donabédian 1991b, 133). The row of intersected circles can also be interpreted as a row of circles enclosing four petals arranged diagonally (Mikayelyan 2023, 75). Of very ancient origin, it is present in various Sassanian ornaments, and can often be seen in Armenia (and Georgia), on quadrilateral stelae datable to the fifth-seventh centuries, on seventh-century window arches and on monuments from the tenth-eleventh centuries [figs 10.3 to 10.5] (Mikayelyan 2023, 76). It is disposed not only in longitudinal rows, but also in large panels. This motif is also sometimes found in painting, for example on the intrados of the apsidal window in the Yereruyk basilica (ca. sixth c.), and on later monuments (Donabédian 2020a, 94-6).

Another geometric ornament of antique origin, shared between Sassanian and Armenian ornamental arts, is the meander or row of svastikas, again arranged either in horizontal belt or in larger rectangular pannel. However this motif, often attested in Sassanian decors, in particular on stucco pannels [fig. 10.2], remained rare in early Christian Armenian art. Its real propagation started later, after the fall of the Sassanid realm, during the tenth-eleventh centuries, in particular in the Bagratid kingdom of Ani and surroundings [figs 10.6, 10.7] (Mikayelyan 2023, 76-8). At the time, the row of svastikas was often included in the large pannel type. Based on the Sassanian heritage, its new favour was probably linked to the establishment of the Arab caliphate. It then benefited from the favour accorded to the rich compositions of 'carpets' combining vegetal and geometric motifs, now propagated within the framework of the caliphate, but still bearing the stamp of the Sassanian heritage.

A more general, technical remark can be made concerning the stucco panels just mentioned, so common in Sassanian wall decorations. Despite the difference in material from the stone used in Armenia, notably volcanic tuff, we cannot help but notice a similarity in the bevelled treatment of the edges of the sculpted ornaments, particularly in the frequent cases of stylized representations during the early Christian period. The resulting grooves, highly conducive to contrasts between light and shadow, are strongly reminiscent of the incisive treatment of Sassanian ornaments on stucco panels. The

same characteristic can be seen on Coptic sculpted motifs from the same period.



Figure 10 Shared Sassanian and Armenian geometric ornaments. 10.1 and 10.2 Sassanian stucco plaques from Ctesiphon (ca. fifth-sixth cc.) with row of X-disposed shuttles and with two bands composed of «svastika» meander. Photos Metropolitan Museum of Art; 10.3-5: Shuttles forming an X, on Armenian monuments. Photos PD. 10.3 Arutj Cathedral (662-66). South façade; 10.4 Sisian, St John church (670s-680s). South façade; 10.5 Ani Cathedral (989-1001). South portal; 10.6-7: Rows and networks of svastikas. 10.6 Marmashen monastery, main church, eastern window (1029) Photo PD; 10.7 Horomos monastery, *gavit* (1038). SW internal plaque of the dome. Photo Hrair Hawk Khatcherian

5 North-Iranian Tomb Towers of Eleventh c. Between Armenian and Seljuk Architectures

5.1 Some Still Obscure Questions

In the study of the age-old exchanges between Iranian and Armenian architectures, one question has remained in the shadows: the possible relationship between these two schools with regard to turriform mausoleums. It was briefly addressed, in a theoretical and preliminary manner, in a communication by Armen Kazaryan and Shakir Shukurov (Kazaryan, Shukurov 2015). Yet this question is particularly relevant when we consider the close links between the Seljuk and post-Seljuk mausoleums of Asia Minor (and western Armenia), known in Turkish as *türbe* or *kümbet* (twelfth-fourteenth cc.), and the characteristic forms of Armenian religious architecture. Let us remind that the *türbe* seems to be a transposition on the soil, of the drum and dome of Armenian (and Georgian) churches. In both cases, the form – a cylindrical drum surmounted by a conical (or umbrella-shaped) dome, or a polygon covered with a pyramidal dome, the decoration of the drum – often a blind arcade, and the ribs on the dome's roof – a reminiscence of antique Roman tiles,

are almost identical. This kinship is reinforced by the community of volcanic stone material and of structure, including the old principle of a funerary chapel on an underground vault, which dates back to the early Christian period.⁵⁵

The origin of the *türbes* built in Anatolia during the Seljuk and Mongol periods has been the subject of various hypotheses, one of which, often cited in specialized literature, invokes presumed traditional funerary practices of the Turkic and Mongol populations of Central Asia, and possible imitation of Turkic or Mongol tents.⁵⁶ However, apart from its weak argumentation,⁵⁷ this hypothesis seems to have two shortcomings: a) it ignores the close relationship indicated above between the *türbes* and Armenian architecture, b) it ignores the existence, in northern Iran, before the arrival of the Seljuks, of funerary constructions which have deep local roots (see below) and already possess many of the features later present in the *türbes*.

5.2 The Samanid Mausoleums in Bukhara and Tim (Tenth c.)

To understand the importance of these pre-Seljuk forms, we must begin by remembering that, after the submersion of the Near and Middle East by the Arab-Muslim wave, Iranian culture, remaining very dynamic, did not weaken, but on the contrary, conquered new spaces by adapting and enriching itself with astonishing innovations. Thus, during the ninth-mid-eleventh centuries took place what is usually called the Persian Renaissance (Loukonine, Ivanov 2003, 33-6).⁵⁸

In architecture, the role played by the brilliant Samanid dynasty of Khorasan, said to descend from the Sassanids, is remarkable. In Bukhara (Transoxiana was then the centre of their domains) in the first half of the tenth century was built the famous mausoleum of Ismail Samanid, both faithful to the Persian Zoroastrian tradition and masterfully innovative (Pope [1969] 1976, 42-4; Ettinghausen, Grabar 1987, 217-20; Hillenbrand 2021, 110-11). Its architecture is based on the structure of the fire temples,⁵⁹ with a dome on a cube through

⁵⁵ On these questions, with bibliography, see Donabédian 2020b, 83-5.

⁵⁶ On the hypotheses related to the origin of the *türbe*, see Michailidis 2015, 145-6 ; Donabédian (2020b, 83-5).

⁵⁷ On the limits of the tent theory, see Adle, Melikian-Chirvani 1972, 287, fn. 1.

⁵⁸ The eastern and northern regions played an important role in the new flourishing of Iranian culture. Particular attention is currently being given to the northern province of Tabarestan/Mazandaran (which we will discuss in terms of its rich architectural creativity) in light of new archaeological investigations: see Abedini Iraqi, Dan 2025.

⁵⁹ According to the concise formula of Hillenbrand (2021, 111), “a fire temple in an Islamic dress”.

unusually articulated squinches. Its decoration, using all the resources offered by small baked bricks, is of unprecedented diversity.

This mausoleum has four portals (one in the centre of each façade) with a first arched frame inscribed in a second, rectangular frame. Although they do not protrude on the façades, these portals can be seen as relatively early representatives of a long lineage that would develop, after a further step taken by the same dynasty in the mausoleum of Tim (see below). This would lead to the propagation of the type of large salient portals called *pishtaq*, in a wide area stretching from Anatolia to India.⁶⁰ Belonging to the same lineage, many portals with a similar principle of double frame (but not so protruding), appeared in Armenia from late twelfth until mid-fourteenth century (Azatyan 1987, 19-21 and numerous illustrations). At the same time, the same design, more richly ornamented, was applied on constructions commissioned by the Seljuks in Anatolia.

A few decades after Bukhara's mausoleum, in 977-78, another member of the Samanid dynasty, Nuh Mansur (976-97), had in turn erected in Tim, in the province of Samarkand, a brick mausoleum with a dome on a cube, known as Arab Ata, also quite innovative. Although relatively modest in size, the Arab Ata mausoleum was to leave a deep and lasting mark on the development of Muslim architecture, including funerary architecture, thanks to two new features (Ettinghausen, Grabar 1987, 219-21, in particular 220, figs. 223 and 224). The first is a previously unknown treatment of the main façade, with a portal of the same composition as its predecessor in Bukhara: a first frame covered by a high pointed arch, inscribed in a rectangular frame, but with unprecedentedly enlarged dimensions. This new portal is amplified to such an extent that it occupies the entire façade, and even exceeds it in height, thus hiding the dome behind it. This can be seen as the birth of what is called the *pishtaq* which would henceforth become the norm throughout the region.

The second decisive contribution of Arab Ata is the very original type of squinches used for the transition from base to dome. This new kind of squinch is made up of four niches, two superimposed rounded niches 'hollowed' in the masonry, and, on both sides of the lower one, two pointed and protruding half niches. The latter are a precocious and elementary form of stalactite (*muqarnas*). In other words, in addition to the appearance of the *pishtaq* portal, the mausoleum of Tim offers in the same device, at the same time, a prototype of what shall become the 'trilobed squinch' (see below) and prototypes of *muqarnas*. These innovations were to gain innumerable followers.

⁶⁰ The first known example of such a portal is in the fortress of Ukhaidir, Iraq, datable to the late eighth c.

5.3 The North-iranian Tomb Towers (eleventh c.)

After the mausoleums of the Samanids built beyond the traditional borders of Iran, at the beginning of the eleventh century, turriiform mausoleums of an apparently new type, known in literature as ‘tomb towers’, began to ‘grow’ one after the other, this time in the north of Iran proper [fig. 11].⁶¹ The Zoroastrian Sassanian origin of these turriiform tombs has been clearly presented by Ch. Adle and A.-S. Melikian-Chirvani (Adle, Melikian-Chirvani 1972). Their principle is based on the Zoroastrian funerary customs of Sassanid kings and princes. This is evidenced, for example, by the request of king Khosrov I Anushirvan (r. 531-79), reported by the famous Persian poet Ferdowsi (early eleventh c.), to have “a tomb built for him in a solitary place”, with “an inaccessible door in the vault of the sepulchral chamber”. This is confirmed by a testimony that this tomb was a *gonbad* (= a domed mausoleum) built on a mountain. Several attestations of this tradition appear in Persian medieval texts. Moreover, the mountainous region of Tabarestan, where these constructions multiplied, remained strongly attached to Zoroastrian traditions in the Middle Ages.

5.3.1 Gonbad-e/Gunbad-i Qābus (1006-07)

The first and most impressive is the tower of Gunbad-i Qābus [fig. 11.1], erected in 1006-7. Made of baked bricks of exceptional quality, its 52 m high cylindrical body, slightly reduced upwards, is equipped with ten triangular protruding edges/buttresses, which give it a striking vertical momentum. The verticality of the edifice is enhanced by its position on a 10 m high artificial hill and by the conical dome which crowns it, a little wider than its base. With its extreme sobriety and purity of lines, this volume, projected, one might say, towards the sky, has a remarkable power of expression.⁶² Sheila Blair rightly points out a trait modest by its size and treatment but important for the history of Islamic architectural decor: its “single entrance doorway [...] is surmounted by trilobed niches, some of the earliest evidence for the development of the *moqarnas*, or stalactite vaulting, in Persia” (Zanjani et al. [2002] 2013).

⁶¹ A brief history of the scholarship on these monuments is proposed by Michailidis (2015, 145-6). André Godard studied two of them, Lajim and Resget (1936), and provided a list of the oldest ones (1949, 259).

⁶² The Gunbad-i Qābus tower is mentioned or studied in many publications on Islamic art and architecture. See for example Ettinghausen, Grabar (1987, 221-2).

Prince Qābus ibn Voshmgir (r. 978-1012), who had this mausoleum built for himself, belonged to the dynasty of the Ziyarids and was also a Bavandid (see below) by his mother (Michailidis 2015, 136). Recently converted to Islam (early tenth c.), the Ziyarids, like the other dynasties of the region, were still attached to their Zoroastrian heritage. The presence in the inscriptions on the tower of texts non only in Arabic, but also in Pahlavi, the language of the Sassanian period, and the use of the Persian solar calendar reflect this fidelity. These inscriptions leave no doubt about the funerary function of the edifice, nevertheless, like the other tomb towers of the group, it does not include an hypogeal vault, neither a simple tomb stone, which means that there was no burial inside the tower neither under it.⁶³ This exceptional monument is the first of several dozens more or less similar (but much lower) constructions that would follow one another over the centuries, and probably their partial prototype.

5.3.2 Mil-e Radkan or Mil-i Gharb (1016-21)

Five related tomb towers built during the first half of the eleventh century, before the Seljuks settled in Iran, are also located in the northern region. Three of them are found in the province of Mazandaran, called Tabarestan at that time, between the Caspian sea shore and the Elborz range. All of them are made of baked brick and have a cylindrical volume. It is generally assumed that they were all initially topped with a conical roof, a point that is actually not so clear for some of them. Three have, in addition to an inscription in Arabic, another (complete or partial) one in Pahlavi.

Mil-e Radkan or Mil-i Gharb (1016-21) is the mausoleum of Mohammad ibn Vandin Bavand, a prince of the local Bavandid dynasty [fig. 11.2]. The Bavandids claimed a Sassanian descent and ruled (with interruptions) the Tabarestan region from seventh to fourteenth centuries (Madelung [1984] 2018; Michailidis 2015, 136-7). They converted to Islam in 841, but the majority of their subjects remained Zoroastrian for centuries. Like in the Gunbad-i Qābus, this is reflected notably in the dedicatory inscription of the monument, where to an Arabic text are added Pahlavi letters.

With a height of 35 meters, this tomb tower is the tallest of the region after Gunbad-i Qābus. Like the latter, it has preserved the conical cover of its dome. As in two other similar constructions of the

⁶³ Ettinghausen, Grabar (1987, 221), as well as Hillenbrand (2021, 110), explain that the coffin of the deceased could have been suspended inside the tower. On this question see Michailidis (2009; 2015, 168, fn. 21) who mentions, citing Ernst Diez, “the legend of Qabus ibn Vushmgir, who [...] was placed in a glass coffin that was suspended by a chain from the dome inside the Gonbad-e Qabus”.

region, its single entrance door is positioned approximately 1,5 m off the ground, obviously to reduce the accessibility of the mausoleum (Michailidis 2015, 140-1, 150 for the inscription).

5.3.3 Tomb Tower of Lajim (1022-23)

The tomb tower in the village of Lajim [fig. 11.3] was built on top of a hill by a princess named Chihrazad in memory of her son Shahriyar ibn Abbas Shahriyar, unknown in other sources, but supposed by Melanie Michailidis to belong to the Bavandid dynasty (Michailidis 2015, 141-2). The dedicatory inscription presents, once again, a text in Arabic, and above it, its equivalent in Pahlavi, now almost illegible (Michailidis 2015, 151 for the inscription). Attention is attracted by one of the rare ornaments of this mausoleum, disposed between the inscription and the cornice, a small colonnade-arcade, which reminds Sassanian forms; its niches seem to prefigure what would become, some decades later, the triple band of stalactites in Abarquh (see below).

In its current state, the dome of the Lajim tower has an ovoid-pointed shape. It may replace an original conical dome, but there is no evidence to support this. Otherwise, it could be seen as a reminder of Sassanid parabolic domes (except for its pointed shape). The same can be said of the Resget tomb tower (see below). Here also, the sole entrance door is approximately 1,8 m off the ground, but it is preceded by seven steps, well preserved (or restored/added?). This door has an original triple elongated frame topped by a triple pointed arch. A tomb lies on the floor, but it is a late cenotaph (Michailidis 2015, 142).

5.3.4 Resget Tower (eleventh c.?)

The tomb tower of Resget [fig. 11.4], not far from Lajim, was probably erected in memory of two brothers, princes of the Bavandid dynasty. The inscription, both in Arabic and Pahlavi, does not provide the date of construction, but the monument has a close kinship with that of Lajim. However, its ornamentation is much richer, with two superimposed rows of small hanging triangles. Under them run two bands apparently made up of plaques of stucco with very refined treatment, including the inscription.⁶⁴ The sole entrance door is

⁶⁴ For this reason, Michailidis (2015, 142) proposes to date it to the late eleventh-early twelfth c.

approximately 1,5 m off the ground, without any steps to access it (Michailidis 2015, 142, 151 for the inscription).

Before the recent installation of a conical metal protection, older photographs showed a distinctly ovoid, fairly high dome, as in Lajim (except for the pointed tip, here absent or no longer visible). If it turns out that the original shape was parabolic, we would have another reference to the Sassanian past.

5.3.5 Damghan, Pir-i Alamdar (1026-27) and Chehel Dokhtaran (1054) Towers

Two tomb towers of the eleventh century are located out of the 'Bavandid domains', in the town of Damghan, to the south of the Elborz mountains ("in the shadow of the Elborz" according to Michailidis 2015, 165).

The oldest, the Pir-i Alamdar, was built for the Ziyarid governor of the region by his son Bakhtiyar in 1026-27 [fig. 11.5] (Adle, Melikian-Chirvani 1972, 231-5, 266-7; epigraphy 250-6; Michailidis 2015, 143). It is a relatively high (16 m) and slim (6.40 m in outer diameter) cylindrical brick tower with a rather low hemispheric, slightly pointed dome. It is not certain that it initially had a conical covering. For the first time, the monument shows, in its upper part, a wide decorative zone, composed of two bands with geometric ornaments, and between them, a high belt with an Arabic inscription in Kufic style.

During their visit in the 1960s, Ch. Adle and A.S. Melikian-Chirvani noted that, on the southwest side, where the mausoleum's door is located, the ground level is about three meters higher than that on the north side of the tower (Adle, Melikian-Chirvani 1972, 233, and plate XVIII). One might wonder if this is not a late filling. In such a case, the initial position of the door may have been close to that observed at the three previous monuments (Mil-e Radkan, Lajim, Resget), that is to say, (very) high, so as not to be immediately accessible.

The second tomb tower of Damghan, called Chehel Dokhtaran, was built, according to its Arabic inscription, in 1054-55 [fig. 11.6]. It obviously follows the model of Pir-i Alamdar (Adle, Melikian-Chirvani 1972, 235-8; epigraphy: 256-9; Michailidis 2015, 143). It has almost the same characteristics and similar proportions but slightly less slender (14.80 in height and 7.80 in outer diameter), with however a higher, parabolic dome, again with a pointed tip,⁶⁵ as in Lajim. Its decoration is abundant and follows the same triple rhythm, with

⁶⁵ Adle and Melikian-Chirvani (1972, 238) cleverly call this shape of dome "en obus" = "shell dome".

two ornamental bands and, between them, a wide and elegant Kufic inscription. The motif used in the two ornamental bands is the Greek meander (the row of svastikas) which was widespread during the Sassanian period (and also popular on Armenian monuments of the eleventh c.). A low tomb lying on the floor of the tower is, in all likelihood, a late addition (Kamali 2014, 2; 2025).

5.3.6 Gunbad-i Ali (1056)

Alongside our report, let us briefly mention a monument that complements the series of innovative creations in northern Iran during the first half of the eleventh century. It is the first (the oldest) among the tomb towers with an octagonal outline, a widespread paradigm in the following centuries throughout the region. The Gunbad-i Ali tower [fig. 11.7] was built in 1056 at Abarquh, far outside the Caspian region, in the province of Fars, by order of a prince named Firuzan, of a local Persian dynasty related to the Ziyarids and Bavandids.⁶⁶

In addition to its original plan, this tomb tower has unusual features: A) It is made of rubble stone instead of brick. B) It has, at the upper edge of the main octagonal volume, above a band with an inscription, a very large cornice with three rows of ‘archaic’ (resembling wide niches) stalactites (*moqarnas/muqarnas*) – a precocious use, in the region, of such a device. Apart from their form, these stalactites are original in that they are modelled in the masonry of rubble stone and mortar. They remind not only the arcade of Lajim but also the ‘proto-stalactites’ used inside Arab Ata mausoleum (see above). C) The dome (perhaps restored) of the tomb tower has an unusual rounded, almost bulbous (onion) form.

This dome is set back from the wide cornice that precedes it. It has therefore been assumed that, in accordance with the octagonal outline of the main volume, it could have been covered by a second, pyramidal dome, which would make it one of the earliest examples of this shape. However, this seems unlikely for two reasons: a) to take into account the curvature of the bulb and the projection of the cornice, a very pointed pyramid would be needed; b) the present dome is carefully built with alternating sloped brick courses in *opus spicatum* (herringbone pattern); it would be strange to cover and hide such meticulous masonry.

⁶⁶ Michailidis (2015, 143); see also: Archnet > Site > Gunbad-i ‘Ali.

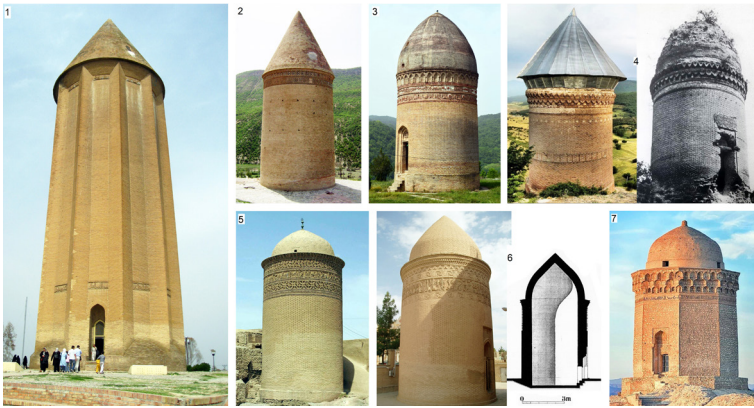


Figure 11 Seven tomb towers of northern Iran prior to Seljuk domination. 11.1 Gunbad-i Qabus (1006-07). Online photo thehistoryhub.com; 11.2 Mil-e Radkan (1016-21). Online photo https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mil-e_Radkan.jpg; 11.3 Lajim (1022-3). Online photo itto.org/iran/; 11.4 Resget/Resket (ca. eleventh c.). Online photo es.iranicultura.it. Archival photo taken in 1933 by André Godard (1936); 11.5 Damghan, Pir-i Alamdar (1026-27). Online photo visitiran.ir; 11.6 Damghan, Chehel Dokhtaran (1054-55). Online photo fr.iranicultura.it. Section by Adle and Chirvani (1972, pl/ XXI); 11.7 Gunbad-i Ali (1056). Online photo www.destinationiran.com

5.4 The Possible Role of the First Pair in the Triad Armenia – Persia – Seljuks

Just as Ch. Adle and A.-S. Melikian-Chirvani (see above), Oleg Grabar believed that the tomb towers in northern Iran were remnants of Zoroastrian funerary traditions (Grabar 1975, 342). At the same time, they obviously served as one of the main sources of inspiration for the more or less tower-shaped mausoleums of the Muslim world, from Central Asia to Anatolia.

Given the importance, from the early Christian period, of the funerary sphere in Armenian sacred architecture, and the considerable development, in Armenia, of turriform structures during and after the period of Seljuk domination (eleventh-thirteenth centuries), we can measure the interest of studying the flowering, in the early Middle Ages, in recently Islamized Iran, then at the beginning of Seljuk rule, of all the innovative structures mentioned above.

This is not the place to open the vast field of possible exchanges between the two schools of architecture, the Persian in its Persian-Seljuk component, and the Armenian with its close links to Seljuk monuments of present Turkey. This should include for example a comparative study of funerary and turriform constructions, a survey of the polygonal and cylindrical drums surmounted by a conical dome, sometimes pleated like an umbrella, a study of the development of the portals with a '*pishtaq* trend', and of the bands and networks of

stalactites transposed from brick to stone. Suffice it to say that all these important questions, whose examination has only partly begun, remain open and consequently request further investigation.

One of the interesting questions that could be asked in this context, for the time being purely theoretically, is the following: could the cylindrical drum topped by a conical dome of the stone churches of Armenia have played a role in the genesis of the tall funerary towers of Iran, made of brick, of which the first examples date back to the early eleventh century? If we take into account that these shapes were elaborated in Armenia towards the end of the Golden Age (last decades of seventh century) as a result of the development of the support of the dome drum by pendentives, which gave to the drum a cylindrical shape (first internal, then also external), and subsequently, very naturally, a conical shape to the dome,⁶⁷ the answer is, in theory, clear.

As we have seen, the dynamics at play in Transoxania in the tenth century and then the rise of tomb towers in northern Iran from the beginning of the eleventh century were of considerable strength. This does not exclude the possibility that a seductive graft from Armenia may have contributed to the creation of these extraordinary forms in brick architecture. In turn, the Seljuk Turks, once settled, after Iran, in Asia Minor, could very well have wanted to draw inspiration from the initial authors of these solutions, who had the advantage of mastering the stone that predominated in their new domains. Of course, this construction of the mind remains hypothetical for the moment, but it may stimulate our investigations.

6 Reticulated Pendentives and Bands in Medieval and Late Medieval Periods

Among the many areas of exchange between Armenian and Muslim Persian and Seljuk architectures, there is one which, it seems, has not yet been studied – that of the reticulated forms in the transitional systems under the dome. In Armenia, these reticulated systems appear in two different periods, while in the Middle-Eastern Muslim world, there was a long continuous process of creation starting from the eleventh century almost until our days, including the very important Timurid phase. This could not take place in Armenia for well-known reasons: the devastations resulting from the decline of Mongol power in the second half of the fourteenth century and

⁶⁷ This evolution is clear in the last decades of the seventh c.: Donabédian 2008, 119-20, 126-9, 186-8. The result becomes a norm in the post-Arab period, since late ninth c.

the invasions of Tamerlane at the end of the fourteenth century, followed by those of the Black Sheep and White Sheep Turkmen in the fifteenth, and then the incessant wars between the Ottomans and Safavids long interrupted the development of Armenian architecture. It was only after the peace treaty between these two states in 1639 that Armenian construction activities could resume.

6.1 Persian-Seljuk New Systems of Transition in the Eleventh-Fourteenth Centuries

Several monuments created in Iran and Transoxiana during the periods of the Seljuk sultanate and the Ilkhanate attest a vivid interest towards new formulas of ornamentation on the inner surface of the domes and of transition under them, and a strong development of complex geometry in architectural compositions and decoration (Bloom, Blair 2009, 1: s.v. 'Architecture. VI. 1. Iran, ca. 1250-ca. 1375', 128-31) [fig. 12]. The present essay does not allow to develop this subject. Suffice it to recall the innovative experiments made, for example, on the numerous domes and vaults of the *Masjid-e-Jameh* (Friday mosques) of Isfahan and of Ardestan (Isfahan province), from the late eleventh century up to, approximately, the early fourteenth century (the datings are uncertain).⁶⁸

It has been noted that the principle of the trilobed squinche created at Tim in 977-8 was brilliantly developed in the brick masonry under the two main domes (late eleventh c.) of *Masjid-e-Jameh* of Isfahan. The same can be said of the main dome of Ardestan (Ettinghausen, Grabar 1987, 279-83). The masterly treatment of the intersecting ribs, used for the construction and at the same time for the decoration of the domes and vaults of the mosque, is not less remarkable (Ettinghausen, Grabar 1987, 283-4). It allowed to ornate the hemispheric surfaces with a great variety of polygonal - triangular, rhombic, and pentagonal - units. Particularly impressive is the example of the large northern dome of the Isfahan mosque (1088-9), where very light arches/ribs, drawing a series of five-pointed stars, cover the hemisphere, through their intersections, with polygons, mainly rhombic [fig. 12.1].

Moreover, in the same mosque, on several parts of the vaults probably dating from a later period (twelfth-early fourteenth cc.?) (Pope, Ackerman 1967, 8: 303), these kinds of intersecting ribs extend to the space located under small domes, again creating polygonal units, in particular triangular [fig. 12.2]. In the mosque of Ardestan,

⁶⁸ Several plates in Pope, Ackerman (1967, 8: 289-303). See also Ettinghausen, Grabar (1987, 257-64, 279-84); Hillenbrand (2021, 112-13).

on a secondary vault with a faintly curved dome, said to date back to the twelfth century (Pope, Ackerman 1967, 8: 326), on its four corner supports (= four 'pendentives'), one can see thin intersecting ribs which delimit a series of rhombic compartments, perfect example of reticulated pendentive [fig. 12.3]. Such figures, if it could be proved that they predate the thirteenth century (which does not seem very likely), could be the source of the shapes present in Armenia and in Seljuk Anatolia, examined below.



Figure 12 Isfahan & Ardestan Friday Mosques. Reticulated devices under domes and vaults (eleventh-fourteenth cc. ?). 12.1 Isfahan, Friday Mosque, northern dome (1088-89); Online photo Diego Delso. 12.2 Isfahan, Friday Mosque, secondary low domes (twelfth-fourteenth cc. ?). Photo Hamid Vakili/Mehr News; 12.3 Ardestan, Friday Mosque, secondary low dome (twelfth-fourteenth cc. ?). Photo Arthur Pope (1967, 3: 326)

6.2 Armenian and Anatolian Seljuk Reticulated Systems (Thirteenth-Fourteenth cc.)

In Armenia, a system of reticulated pendentives and reticulated horizontal band appeared from the early thirteenth to the first decades or fourteenth century inside several narthexes (*gavit/zhamatun* in Armenian), some monastic buildings and in one funerary chapel [fig. 13]. It was applied to the transition zone between the square formed by the supports and the circular or polygonal base of the dome (or the lantern), in such edifices which have a low dome, without a drum, with a central skylight, or a lantern in the form of a small rotunda [figs 13.1 to 13.8].

This reticulated system used mainly arrangements of triangular plaques/caissons, more or less decorated with sculpted motifs. It took three forms:

- a. a pair of triangular plaques, pointing downwards, replaces each of the four pendentives; in the narthex of Khorakert monastery, now ruined, on three of the corners, instead of two, there were three triangular plaques (Mnatsakanyan 1952, 93, fig. 72);
- b. the four compartments between the 'pendentives' may feature three head to tail triangles or an arrangement of other stone shapes, or nothing at all if the space is too tight;
- c. above the 'pendentives' level, in six cases, the horizontal band preceding the dome or lantern is occupied by a row of smaller, triangular caissons, head to tail.

The eight (partially) preserved Armenian examples (the narthexes of Saghmosavank [shortly after 1215], Tegher [1221], Makaravank [before 1224], Khorakert [1252], Neghuts [thirteenth c.], a refectory [ca. 1250] and a library [1262] in the monastery of Haghbat, and the Holy Mother of God chapel at Yeghvard [early fourteenth c.]) are part of a series of experiments related to the same issues, demonstrating the inventiveness of builders in their search for a variety of solutions (Mnatsakanyan 1952, 54-5, 51-60, 63, 65, 71, 93, 95, 113, fig. 95).

The same principle of triangular caissons fitted into a transitional belt under a dome (often also equipped with a central skylight) on a square, can be seen in Muslim monuments of Seljuk Anatolia/Asia Minor. Three examples are located in Iconium/Konya (capital of the Seljuk Rum sultanate from late eleventh to thirteenth century): in Alaeddin mosque (ca. 1220s) (Redford 1991), Karatay *medrese/madrassa*, and Ince Minareli *medrese/madrassa* (1251-2 and 1265-79 respectively) [figs 13.9 to 13.11] (Ettinghausen, Grabar 1987, 318-22). These caissons are usually called in specialized literature 'Seljuk triangles' (Yetkin 1962, 9) or 'Turkish triangles' (Ettinghausen, Grabar 1987, 325). They are adorned (only underlined on their edges in the case of Ince Minareli *medrese*) with turquoise glazed tiles bearing polygons and stars.

In the Alaeddin mosque [fig. 13.9], the earliest of the group, each angle is filled by three triangles, with the central one pointing downwards; and along the remaining length of each of the four sides, six smaller triangles are placed head to tail. The whole row constitutes a more or less regular horizontal band. This scheme is clearly related to the principle of single or double horizontal row of triangles head to tail adopted on the Armenian monuments mentioned above.

In the two *medrese*-s, the picture is a little different: only the four corners under the dome are concerned, and each of them is occupied by a cluster of five (Karatay *medrese* - fig. 13.10) and

four (Ince Minareli *m.* – fig. 13.11) long triangular rays, pointing downwards. The scheme present here is closer to the one employed on the pendentives of the Makaravank narthex.

An original solution is adopted in the extraordinary mosque-hospital of Tevrik/Tephrike/Divriği (Pancaroglu 2009) (1228-9), where similar triangles, devoid of ornamentation, have the form of protruding dihedrals [fig. 13.12].

Beyond the hypothetical (but not really convincing) common Iranian source of inspiration envisaged above, it is impossible not to see, despite the differences, the deep kinship that links the two devices, Armenian and Anatolian Seljuk, and the fact that this experiment is proper to them. The stone material may have played a certain role, but the sharing of experience, widely evidenced elsewhere between Armenian and Seljuk architectures (Donabédian 2020b, 80-101), is also very likely.

It is possible that a conjunction of factors led to the very bold formulas that were multiplying under the Timurids during the fifteenth century. Perhaps both the (probably first) networks elaborated in Armenia and Seljuk Anatolia, and the experiments that had begun to emerge on the same subject of dome supports in Iran and Central Asia under the Seljuks and Mongols, would now converge to flourish under the Timurids.⁶⁹ The continued use of ‘Seljuk triangles’ in early Ottoman constructions (Goodwin 1971, first four chapters [15-141], *passim*) should also be considered as a possible factor of transmission. In any case, the developments recorded during the Timurid period marked a radically new stage in the history of reticulated devices of transition.

69 Note on this subject, in Bloom and Blair (2009, 3: s.v. ‘Squinch’, 230), the following remark: “Closely related to the [Timurid] squinch-net vault are so-called ‘Turkish triangles’ which simplify the squinch into a vertical fan of triangular facets, as can be seen in the Karatay Medresa in Konya.” This interesting observation, which highlights the link between the two phenomenons, must be completed by the mention of the parallel, simultaneous and obviously also related Armenian experiments.

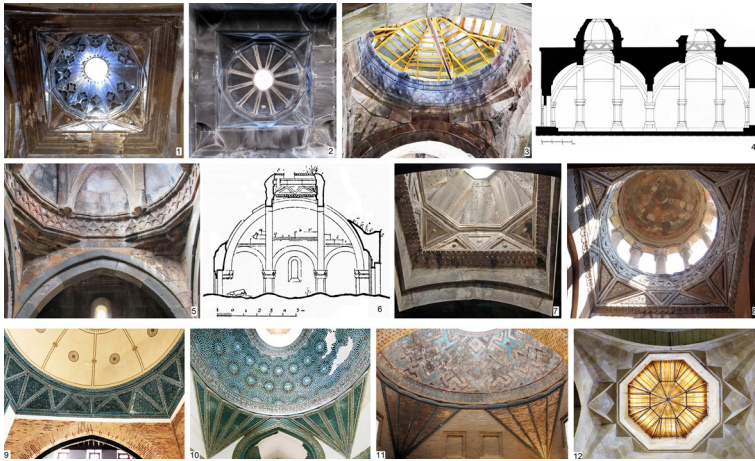


Figure 13 Armenian and Anatolian Seljuk reticulated systems (thirteenth-fourteenth cc.). 13.1-8: Eight Armenian monuments (present-day Republic of Armenia) – photos PD. 13.1. Saghmossavank monastery, narthex/*gavit* (shortly after 1215); 13.2. Tegher monastery, narthex/*gavit* (1221); 13.3. Makaravank monastery, narthex/*gavit* (before 1224); 13.4. Haghbat monastery, refectory (ca. 1250). Longitudinal section by Anatoly Jakobson, after Thierry & Donabédian (1987, 535, fig. 734); 13.5. Neghuts monastery, narthex/*gavit* (thirteenth c.); 13.6. Khorakert monastery, narthex/*gavit* (1252). Longitudinal section by Stepan Mnatsakanyan (1952, 93, fig. 72); 13.7. Haghbat monastery, library (1262); 13.8. Yeghvard, Holy Mother of God chapel (first decades of fourteenth c.); 13.9-12: Four Anatolian Seljuk monuments (present-day Republic of Turkey). 13.9. Iconium/Konya, Alaeddin Mosque (ca. 1220s). Online photo Ersin Gin/Flickr; 13.10. Iconium/Konya, Karatay medrese/madrasa (1251-2). Online photo Ali Berrada; 13.11. Iconium/Konya, Ince Minareli medrese/madrasa (1265-79). Online photo dome.mit.edu/Igor Demchenko; 13.12. Tevrik/Tephrike/Divriği, mosque-hospital (1228-29). Online photo R. Prazeres/Wikimedia Commons

6.3 Sophisticated Formulas Elaborated Under the Timurids (Fifteenth c.)

After Tamerlane's ravages of late fourteenth century, the Timurid golden age began in Central Asia, in Transoxiana in particular, in its capital, the city of Samarkand, as well as in Khorasan (northeast of current Iran and main part of Afghanistan).⁷⁰ It lasted throughout the fifteenth century until the early sixteenth.⁷¹ A plethora of architects and masons of various origins, many of which were forcibly brought from the conquered countries, were then at work. Building on the Ilkhanid heritage, they erected a large number of edifices remarkable

⁷⁰ The author expresses his sincere gratitude to Sussan Babaie for her precious bibliographical assistance.

⁷¹ For a thorough and detailed study of Timurid architecture see Golombek, Wilber (1988). A useful synthesis on Timurid architecture, mainly in Transoxiana, can be found in Pougatchenkova (1981). A more detailed analysis, in the (wide) limits of historical Khorasan, is given by O'Kane (1987). See also Bloom, Blair 2009, 1: s.v. 'Architecture, VI, 2. Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia c. 1375-c. 1500', 131-137).

for their considerable scale, the sophistication of their compositions and the splendor of their ornamentation [fig. 14]. The Timurid domes, in particular, now often double-shelled (sometimes even triple-shelled),⁷² presumably were intended to impress the faithful and subjects both by the considerable elevation of their exterior volume in an onion bulb shape (bulging and pointed) covered with turquoise glazed tiles, and by the richness of their internal treatment.

Due to the subject of this part of our study, we will focus our attention on vaults and domes, and particularly on the transition devices under them, as well as on the complex geometry used for their elaboration. One of the great masters of this science and art was the architect Qivam al-Din of Shiraz (fl. 1410-1438),⁷³ notably the author of the mausoleum of queen Gawhar-Shad (1417-38) in Herat (Afghanistan) [figs 14.1, 14.4 to 14.6] (Golombek, Wilber 1988, 192, 302-7) and of the *madrasa* (quranic school) known as Ghiyathiyya (1438-44) in Khargird (Iran) [figs 14.7-8] (O’Kane 1976; Golombek, Wilber 1988, 148-50, 322-4).

In these monuments, the observer is struck by the multitude of cells, both small and large, that cover the surfaces under the dome. The small ones are *muqarnas* (stalactites), several polygons, rays..., while the large ones are squinches and pendentives, which are themselves hewn into cells. This results in a unification of the interior space where the dome seems to have an unreal lightness, where the differences between the various components and their respective functions tend to fade away and merge into a sumptuous enchantment, harmonious despite the innumerable number of elements composing it. To imagine the atmosphere which prevailed in such spaces, one must add the rich polychromy that existed on their vaults, as can still be seen, for example, in the Herat Mausoleum of Gawhar-Shad [fig. 14.6].

The description and analysis of the devices used in these complex constructions are made difficult by their great diversity.⁷⁴ One of their important elements is the large triangular spandrel between the thin pointed arches which, departing from the angles of the hall, delimit the central square (in some cases the two superimposed central squares). In each of the four spandrels, these arches, as well as secondary ribs, intersect and create a network. Some authors refer to them as ‘reticulated pendentives’ or ‘pendentives network’

⁷² Like for example on the Mausoleum of Gawhar Shad in Herat (1438): Pougatchenkova 1981, 126.

⁷³ On the “Luminary of the Timurid court”, see O’Kane 1976, 79, 92; 1987, 37, 50; Wilber 1987; Golombek, Wilber 1988, 189-93; Bloom, Blair 2009, 3: 137; Babaie 2011.

⁷⁴ See, in O’Kane 1987, the ch. Vaulting (46-8) and Domes (49-53); in Golombek, Wilber 1988, see the ch. The Geometry of Stellate Vaults (169-72).

(Pougatchenkova 1981, 27-9);⁷⁵ others prefer the terms ‘reticulated squinches’ or ‘squinch nets’.⁷⁶ To describe these complex systems, the rightest is probably to cite those who have long studied them.

Bernard O’Kane, for example, wrote: “it was the set of intersecting arches to transform the space within this standard shell [the domed square] which became the hallmark of Timurid vaulting techniques in the first half of the fifteenth century” (O’Kane 1987, 49-50). A little further on, the same author added: “The combination of intersecting arches and transverse vaults was also used with squinch nets – zones of transition [...] – another form of vaulting whose development was forged in the Timurid period”. And also: “The intersecting arches combine to produce a series of [...] rhomboidal compartments with a zig-zag outline” (O’Kane 1987, 51).

Insightful observations have also been made by Lisa Golombek and Donald Wilber, for example: “Walls were virtually eliminated as arched niches in them became wider and wider, higher and higher. [...] Domes erected over intersecting arches appear to float without support. [...] In Timurid architecture every effort is made to establish vertical linkage” (Golombek, Wilber 1988, 212).

As noted above, the principle of the diamond networks under the domes had probably already started to emerge in Iran in the previous period. For their part, the Armenians and the Seljuks of Anatolia, in the thirteenth century, had already elaborated their specific initial variant. Nevertheless, the sophistication of the compositions and devices developed by the architects in the service of the Timurids is truly one of the emblematic forms of their art.

After the collapse of the Timurid power, like a large part of the eastern Muslim world, the Safavid Iran, from the sixteenth century, seized this heritage to enrich its own architectural vocabulary. In turn, in the seventeenth century, the Armenians, transplanted in Iran, benefited from this huge transmission and adopted some of the characteristic features of the Timurid-Safavid repertoire.

75 A confusion by the translator between ‘pendentive’ and ‘squinch’ is not excluded. But in any case, the result is, at least for the author of these lines, acceptable.

76 O’Kane (1987, 51, 60, *passim*); Bloom, Blair (2009, 3: 228-30, s.v. ‘Squinch’) speak of “squinch-net vaulting” (229) and of “network of squinches or pendentives” (230).

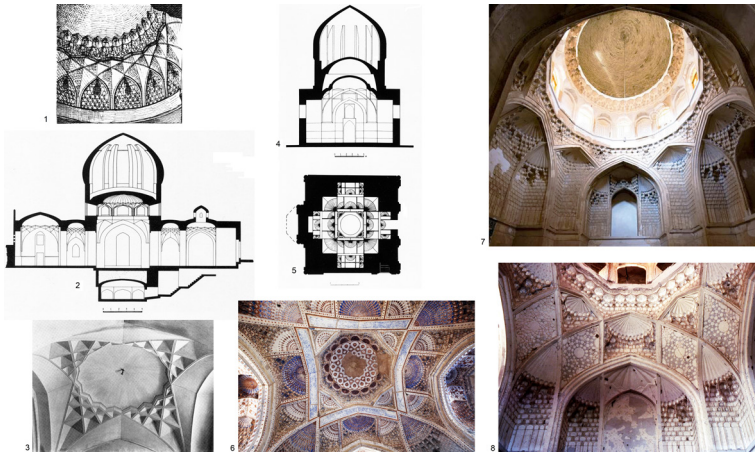


Figure 14 The apotheosis of reticulated devices under Timurids (fifteenth c.). 14.1. Herat (Afghanistan), Gawhar-Shad mausoleum (1417-38), conch. Architect Qivam al-Din of Shiraz. Drawing after Galina Pougatchenkova (1981, 28, fig. 17); 14.2-3: Mashhad (Iran), Masjed-i Shah (1451). Longitudinal section and secondary low dome, after Pougatchenkova (1981, 165); 14.4-5: Herat, Gawhar-Shad mausoleum (1417-38). Lateral section and plan, after Pougatchenkova (1981, 126); 14.6. Herat, Gawhar-Shad mausoleum. Zenithal view of the dome. Architect Qivam al-Din of Shiraz. Online photo Marius Arnesen; 14.7-8: Khargird (Iran), madrasa Ghiyathiyya (1438-44). Initial architect Qivam al-Din of Shiraz. 14.7. Dome of the mosque, internal view. Online photo Alamy Stock; 14.8. Dome of the Dars-khana (Lecture hall), internal view. Online photo Pinterest.co.kr

6.4 Armenian Reticulated Pendentives and Bands Under Safavid Rule

The brilliant achievements of architects in the service of Safavid power of Iran [pl. 15] are well enough known that there is no need to detail their characteristics here.⁷⁷ Suffice it to say that, from the late sixteenth century onwards, the most representative monuments were to be found in the new capital, Isfahan, and their domed interiors were distinguished by networks of intersecting arches directly inspired by those of the Timurids and no less sophisticated than them.

6.4.1 The Foundation of New Julfa, a Suburb of Isfahan

In 1604-5, the Armenians were torn from several eastern and southeastern regions of their country, for most of them with an extreme violence, and deported to Iran by Shah Abbas I Safavid, in particular, from the flourishing trading cities and craft centers of

⁷⁷ See Hillenbrand [1986] 2008; Bloom, Blair 2009, 1: s.v. 'Architecture. VII. c. 1500-c. 1900. B. Iran. 1. c. 1500-c. 1700', 171-5.

the Araxes valley (province of Nakhichevan), and first of all from the town of Jugha/Julfa. The Shah's objective was twofold: a) to deprive the Ottomans of resources that could favour their campaigns against him, b) to benefit from the talents of Armenian artisans and merchants in order to develop the economy of his kingdom and notably its silk trade. The wealthiest of the former inhabitants of Julfa were resettled in a suburb of Isfahan called New Julfa.⁷⁸

In a very short period, thanks to the protection and privileges accorded by Shah Abbas, the deportees managed to build the entire district of New Julfa (Carswell 1968), which included, in the seventeenth century, thirty-two⁷⁹ churches (among them, the primatial Holy Savior, usually called 'Vank' [monastery], is a monastic church)⁸⁰ and several sumptuous residences (Karapetian 1974; Hakopian, Hovhannisian 2007). The high density of sanctuaries in a relatively small area (about 1.5 km x 1 km) and for a population that, at the height of the growth of this community, numbered 30,000 souls (Bayburdyan, Harutyunyan 1982, 366), is astonishing. It naturally reflects the religious fervor of the inhabitants, but also the spirit of emulation that animated the faithful and especially the wealthiest notables and merchants, within each part of the Armenian quarter. The former deportees also succeeded in creating a considerable economic power capable of promoting and monopolizing a large part of the international silk trade of the Safavid kingdom.⁸¹

6.4.2 New Julfa's Churches, a New Page in Armenian Architecture

Earlier in this essay, the 'unique phenomenon' of the *khatchkars* of Jugha was evoked as a kind of precursor to the architectural and decorative 'revolution' that was to take place in Isfahan. Indeed, what happened in the Armenian community of New Julfa has much to do with a revolution in Armenian religious customs and architectural traditions.

⁷⁸ A synthesis on the "Great deportation" and the foundation of New Julfa can be found in Mahé, Mahé 2012, 344-9.

⁷⁹ According to Armen Hakhnazarian and Vahan Mehrabian (1992, 14-5), concerning the seventeenth c., this impressive number included 25 (or 24; see page 13) apostolic churches (of which twelve are destroyed or ruined) and seven catholic churches (all destroyed).

⁸⁰ The difference between church and monastery is somehow questionable in Isfahan, as Armenian churches had a particularity: each of them was surrounded by various ancillary buildings, including a well, a bread oven, cells..., and was protected by high walls. These ensembles could thus serve as shelters for the population in times of necessity. See Hakhnazarian, Mehrabian 1992, 13.

⁸¹ See Khachikyan 1988; Chaudhury, Kévonian 2008; Aslanian 2011; Mahé, Mahé 2012, 355-8.

Transplanted to Isfahan, the Armenians began to build dozens of religious complexes all united by a great homogeneity, although far removed from traditional rules. First of all, despite the fact that New Julfa was isolated from the rest of the city, they ensured that their churches, like the fortified monasteries of the Middle Ages, were all protected by strong enclosures and were self-sufficient. Settled in a region with few lapidary materials, the builders had no difficulty to use brick as, for many of them coming from the province of Nakhichevan, this material was familiar. For the composition of their churches, they chose two of the domed types most widespread in their country: the inscribed cross church with a dome on four free supports, and the domed hall (*kuppelhalle*) or partitioned inscribed cross church, where the supports of the dome are attached to the perimetral walls. But, as Armen Hakhnazarian noted, aside from the planimetric compositions, most of the other elements show a strong Iranian influence.⁸²

One of the most striking features is that on the double-shelled cupolas of the largest churches (Holy Bethlehem [1628] and the Holy Savior [1655-64]), [fig. 15.1], the upper dome is slightly onion-shaped (bulbous), a trait absolutely unknown in Armenia. As in Timurid and Safavid mosques, many (large and small) domes have a skylight in their center, often surmounted by a lantern. Apart from the main dome, in the secondary spaces of the churches, the traditional barrel vaults are systematically replaced by low, slightly curved domes (perhaps better called calottes/caps), often with a central skylight. In the indoor spaces, the arches are all pointed, like in Timurid and Safavid architectures. Similarly, the façades are often animated by rows of typically Iranian wide flat niches covered by a pointed arch.

Among other elements borrowed from Iranian repertoire, one can mention, in external decorations (but not on the domes), the use, however modest, of small blue tiles, and in windows, the presence of *transennae* in brick and colored glass. An unusual element in Armenian context, of rather byzantine origin, is the presence, above the western arm of the churches, of an internal tribune for women (a *matroneum*), bordered by a high wooden parapet. Probably on the model of the *iwan* of Iranian mosques, in the inner courtyard of some of the Armenian complexes, a separate apse is built, widely open and called 'summer church', allowing to celebrate mass outdoors on the hottest times of the year.

Before moving on to the examination of reticulated systems, a major characteristic must be underlined, the abundance of interior decoration. Among the numerous churches built in New Julfa *grosso*

⁸² Hakhnazarian, Mehrabian (1992, 13). On the architecture of these churches see also Hasratian (2011).

modo in the first half of the seventeenth century, the main ones (Holy Mother of God [1613], Holy Bethlehem [1628] and the Holy Savior [1655-64]) stand out not only for their architectural originalities, but also for their painted (and ceramic) decoration of mainly high quality and astonishing opulence. This decoration juxtaposes religious figurations inspired by western European models, and sophisticated ornamental compositions borrowed from the Safavid Persian repertoire.⁸³ This choice is representative of a dynamic society, led by a mercantile elite in constant contact with the great cities of the West. While remaining attached to its identity and faith, this society was largely open both to local culture and to the external world, particularly to European art. The richness of the internal decoration of New Julfa's churches also reflects the considerable resources available to their patrons.

6.4.3 Armenian Reticulated Pendentives and Bands in New Julfa (Isfahan)

Naturally, the question of the transition under the vaults and domes, which is our primary concern, deserves a particular attention. In all the Armenian churches of New Julfa we observe the widespread application of arch intersections that create reticulated pendentives and bands. However, in all cases, the formula reproduced is a simplified version of Persian models, as if the aim was to avoid excessive sophistication and, on the contrary, to highlight the clarity of the device composed of an adjustment of some rhombuses [fig. 15.1]. On the first, lowest stage under the dome, on each angle, an elongated rhombic pendentive is surmounted by one or two (very rarely three) rows of slightly concave lozenges. The same is true for the secondary low domes and for the half-domes of the apses. Inside the Holy Savior cathedral, however, the hemisphere of the dome shows a relatively complex treatment, obviously inspired by the luxuriant ornamentation of the *Masjid-e-Jameh* (Friday Mosque) of Isfahan (see above). Here we see an eight-pointed star, each extremity of which presents the same disposition: one elongated rhombus, then two rows of (two + three) lozenges.

Omnipresent in New Julfa, the system of reticulated pendentives and bands developed from the beginning of the Armenian implantation in Isfahan. It is therefore natural that we also find it in other

⁸³ Important studies were carried out on New Julfa's mural paintings during the twentieth c.: Carswell 1968, 21-5; Martikyan 1971, 6-29; Ghazaryan 1974, 13-50. More recent publications on this subject: Laporte-Eftekharian 2006; 2011; 2021; Hakobyan 2009, 238-43; Landau 2019; Babaian 2021.

Armenian communities established in Iran, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. In two important ensembles of the Tabriz province (northwestern Iran), Saint-Stephen of Maghardavank near Darashamb (1643-80) [fig. 15.2] (Hofrichter, Uluhogian 1980, 48-53, 57-63; Alpago Novello 1988, 83, 87), and Sohrul/Sorhul (ca. 1840 – fig. 15.4) (Alpago Novello 1988, 20, 31, 39), it is applied on the pendentives, as well as on the lower part of the hemisphere of the dome, and at the base of the conchs, and, in the case of Sohrul, it approaches, to a certain extent, the complexity it had acquired during the Timurid period. On the contrary, in the famous ensemble of Saint-Thaddeus of Artaz, inside the main, white church (1810s-20s), the reticulated system is considerably diminished, almost indiscernible [fig. 15.3]. It is reduced to a corolla of eight triangles, under the circular ring of the dome's drum. This corolla is created by the tips of the four main arches and the broken band that crowns each of the four pendentives (Kleiss, Seihoun 1971, 46-8, 64, 66). However, it should be noted that nowhere, outside of New Julfa, has anyone among the Armenian architects allowed themselves to erect bulging domes as a second covering instead of the traditional conical, pyramidal or umbrella-shaped domes.

Nevertheless, Safavid-Armenian architecture of New Julfa, and in particular the reticulated devices have exerted a certain influence on Armenia itself. This influence is significant not because of the breadth of its reach (in reality very limited) but because it concerned the main sanctuary of the country, Echmiadzin Cathedral. It is possible that the painted treatment of the reticulated pendentives in the main churches of New Julfa played a role in the 'appeal' of this device. In the three mentioned sanctuaries of New Julfa, each of the main, three lower lozenges of the reticulated pendentives is occupied by a winged angel (*cherub* with two pairs of wings and *seraph* with three pairs of wings), whereas the three rhombuses of the upper row bear light floral motifs of Persian inspiration. It is easy to imagine how, set against a dark background, the pictures of these angels, painted in gold and placed at the top of the sacred space, at the four corners (spandrels) under its central circle, could impress the faithful and visitors. Thus, the images could contribute to the attractiveness of the carrying form.

6.4.4 The Influence of New Julfa's Architecture on Armenia Itself

In mainland Armenia, after centuries of devastation, after the great deportation at the beginning of the seventeenth century, although peace was restored by the Ottoman-Safavid treaty of 1639, the means were lacking to meet the immense needs for reconstruction. It was therefore primarily in the primatial cathedral of Echmiadzin that the sumptuous model of the domes and vaults of New Julfa was applied, with their principle of all-encompassing painted decor, combining Christian iconography and Iranian plant ornamentation.

In 1627, restoration work began on the dome of Echmiadzin Cathedral, which probably continued in the following years (Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, 32). Between 1654 and 1658, the great porch-bell tower was added to the west of the edifice, and in 1682, lanterns were erected above the other three apses. Finally, throughout the eighteenth century, successive members of the Hovnatanian 'dynasty'⁸⁴ covered the interior of the cathedral with paintings on the upper part of the walls, the vaults and the dome.⁸⁵

The current state of the interior of the dome is therefore the result of numerous and lengthy interventions. It is likely that the very succinct formula, at each of the four corners under the drum, of the diamond-shaped pendentives tapering downwards, topped with two horizontally stretched lozenges, dates back to the first stage of these works [fig. 15.5]. As for the murals, they are attributed to Naghash Hovnatanian (ca. 1712-21) (Avetisyan 2019, 266; 2022, 128) and were partly repainted by Hovnatan Hovnatanian (ca. 1778-86) (Avetisyan 2019, 267; 2022, 129). However, it is interesting to note that the angels, so present on the pendentives of New Julfa, have been slightly reduced in size in Echmiadzin and transferred higher up, to the spandrels of one of the friezes decorating the hemisphere of the dome, and on other parts of the cathedral. One is at the top of the eastern arch under the drum, others on the axial (eastern and western) arms' vaults. For the rest, the painted surfaces are occupied by rows of complex, highly detailed plant compositions, diversified overall, but repeated identically in each row, which is unusual in Armenian art. The general image that emerges is one of great novelty compared to Armenian tradition and of deep kinship with Safavid (and of course with Safavid-Armenian) decorations. Nevertheless, obvious originalities can be observed, such as a more

⁸⁴ On the history/genealogy of this family of painters since the seventeenth c. see Khachatryan-Paladian 2017, 61-71, ch. *The Dynasty of the Hovnatanians*; Avetisyan 2022, 162-200, ch. *The Hovnatanians*; Dzutsova 2022, 263-73. ch. *Back to the Sources*.

⁸⁵ For a recent summary on this question (with bibliography) see Avetisyan 2019, 266-7.

measured coverage of the painting, the space given to empty (free) areas, and the large presence of the motif of the row of cypress trees, very popular in Islamic art (Aamir, Pervaiz 2018), but quite rare in Armenian art.

It must be acknowledged that, apart from the cathedral of Echmiadzin, the model of the reticulated network and rich painted decoration of New Julfa has been little followed in the rest of the country, perhaps due to a lack of resources, but also likely because of the overly unusual nature of these innovations. Such forms and devices are encountered in the aforementioned monuments of the north-west of present-day Iran (Saint Steven, Sorhul and Saint Thaddeus – [figs. 15.2 to 15.4]), which at that time (seventeenth-nineteenth cc.) were located in a still culturally, religiously, and ethnically mainly or partly Armenian region. They were also present in the province of Nakhichevan (now part of the Republic of Azerbaijan – see above), which, as the rest of eastern Armenia was then part of Persia. In Nakhichevan, as mentioned above, nothing remains of the monuments, but photographs taken by historian Argam Ayvazyan in the 1970s-80s attest the relatively large use of such devices on monuments of the second half of the seventeenth century [figs 15.6 to 15.9]. Reticulated bands and pendentives as well as painted decorations combining religious scenes and Iranian-style ornaments were used for example in churches of the small town of Agulis: St. Thomas (Ayvazyan 1984b, 26-31, figs. 14, 16-18; 1990b, 121-3, figs. 57-9), St. Christopher (Ayvazyan 1984b, 35-8, figs. 33-4; 1990b, 126-7, figs. 63, 65), St. John the Baptist (Ayvazyan 1984b, 40-3, fig. 40) and Holy Sign [Sb Nshan] of Storin Agulis [Lower Agulis].⁸⁶ The same was true, in Nakhichevan, for St. John the Baptist of Abrakunis (Ayvazyan 1981, 75-7, figs. 96-9; 1990b, 186-7, figs. 128, 130), St. Steven of Astapat ('Red monastery') (Ayvazyan 1981, 108-9, fig. 62; 1990b, 220, fig. 166) and St. John the Baptist of Tjahuk (Ayvazyan 1981, 121; 1990b, 366-7, figs. 340-1).

Although not directly related to our topic, the Blue Mosque of Yerevan, built on the orders of the Persian governor Husein Ali Khan in 1764-5, is worth mentioning. In its current state, after a significant restoration from 1997 to 2006 by a mixed Iranian-Armenian team, it has, in its main prayer hall, an original interior decoration that is slightly richer in design than that of purely Armenian monuments, but also surprisingly more sober, as it has a white background. The four large pendentives supporting the dome are adorned with three rows of lozenge, the last lozenge at the bottom, with a pointed lower

⁸⁶ The author is grateful to the president of UIOTC Organization (Union Internationale des Organisations Terre et Culture), Keram Kevonian, and to Isabelle Ouzounian, head of UIOTC's photo collections, for allowing him access to the organization's documentation from the Argam Ayvazyan Fund. Here are concerned, from the Holy Sign church of Storin Agulis, photos n° V-18071-75 of 1982.

tip, is curiously covered with a fine network of lines designing various diamonds (Nalbandyan 2023, 93, fig. 6).

It can finally be reported, here and there in Armenia, and notably in the city of Meghri, at the southern tip of the Republic, on the current border with Iran, in seventeenth-century churches, despite the absence of reticulated systems, the use of very vividly colored murals where, alongside naive-style biblical figures, Iranian floral compositions abound.

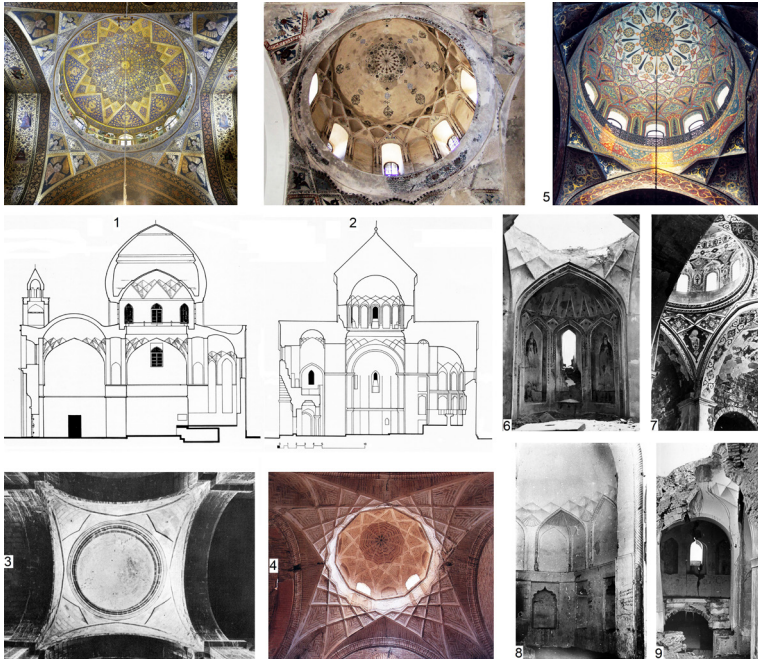


Figure 15 Safavid-Armenian reticulated devices and their impact on Armenia. 15.1. Isfahan, New Julfa, St Savior (1655-64), main dome. Photo Hrair Hawk Khatcherian. Longitudinal section after Armen Hakhnazarian (1991-92, 22); 15.2. Maghardavank, St Stephen (Tabriz province, northwestern Iran) (1643-80). Internal view of the dome. Photo Ara Melikian. Longitudinal section after Hartmut Hofrichter (1980, 62); 15.3. Artaz, St Thaddeus (northwestern Iran), dome of the main church (1810s-20s), internal view. Photo Wolfram Kleiss (1971, 46, fig. 35); 15.4. Sohrul/Sorhul church (northwestern Iran) (ca. 1840). Zenithal view of the dome. Photo Adriano Alpago Novello (1988-89, 37, fig. 7); 15.5. Echmiadzin Cathedral (Republic of Armenia). Internal view of the dome (seventeenth-eighteenth cc.). Photo Hrair Hawk Khatcherian; 15.6-9. Nakhichevan (present-day Republic of Azerbaijan), churches of Astapat and Agulis (seventeenth c., destroyed). Photos by Argam Ayyvazyan (1980s), Ayyvazyan Fund of Land and Culture Organization (OTC). 15.6. Astapat, St Stephen, internal view of the apse. Photo OTC V-36715; 15.7. Agulis, St Thomas, internal view towards the dome and the SE pendentive. Photo OTC V-33618; 15.8-9 Agulis, St John the Baptist, the apse and a portion of pendentive. Photos OTC V-33657 and V-33662

7 **Conclusion: Prodigious New Julfa as a Condense Picture of a Very Old Kinship**

The purpose of this essay was to briefly discuss certain stages of what should in reality be a long journey spanning many centuries and even millennia of exchanges between Armenians and Iranians. The term 'exchanges' is used here in a conventional sense. It would probably be more accurate to speak mainly of borrowings of Iranian models by Armenians, even though, at the same time, certain transfers in the opposite direction should also be taken into consideration. First of all, we must admit that there is still much to be investigated. The question, for example, of a possible Armenian contribution to the creation of turritiform cylindrical tomb towers with conical dome remains open. The same concerns the possible role of the Armenian and Anatolian-Seljuk experiments in the genesis of the Timurid, then Safavid reticulated transitions. As for the question of the contribution of the Armenians of New Julfa to the diffusion of European styles, patterns, and ideas in Persia, it seems quite plausible, but also requires further exploration and more documentation.

We believe that the rightest way to (provisionally) conclude is to once again contemplate the images of the splendid Cathedral of the Holy Saviour in New Julfa and to admire the astonishing synthesis of Persian and Armenian traditions, together with borrowings from European iconography, as well as the extraordinary innovations that come together there. What has been done here and more generally in the New Julfa district of Isfahan is exceptional, especially with regard to the domes of these churches. Indeed, nowhere else but in the capital of Safavid Iran did Armenian architects dare to cover their sanctuaries with bulbous domes.⁸⁷ With the prodigious opulence of their interiors, their reticulated devices and their bulbous domes, these dazzling buildings erected in a few decades in the seventeenth century, remain the symbol of the New Julfa miracle, the symbol of a unique Armenian-Persian syncretism, heir to an age-old relationship.

⁸⁷ The bulb-shaped dome was introduced in the architecture of Russian churches perhaps from the thirteenth century and certainly from the fifteenth century. The question of its origin is a matter of great interest, but beyond the scope of the present study. On this subject see Zagraevsky 2008.

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A Study of the Typologies of Armenian Churches in Iran

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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.

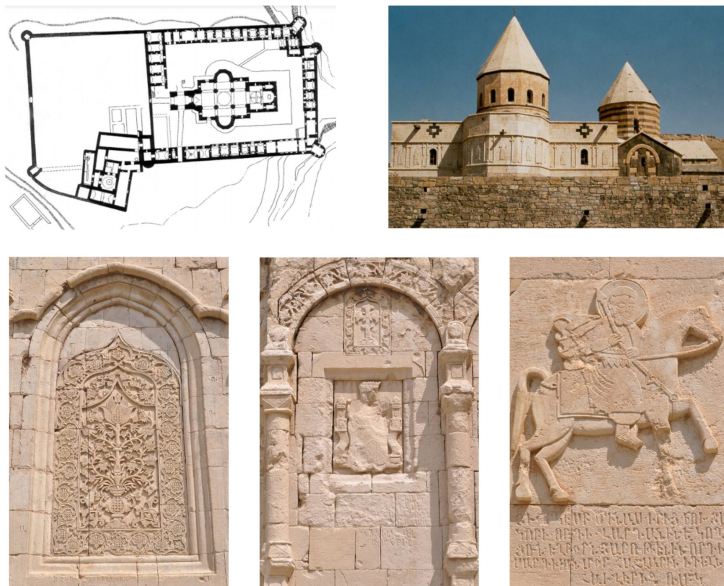


Figure 1 Author, St. Thaddeus Monastery: architectural plan, exterior view, and details of carved stone decoration. n.d. Photographs and drawing. Maku, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



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].

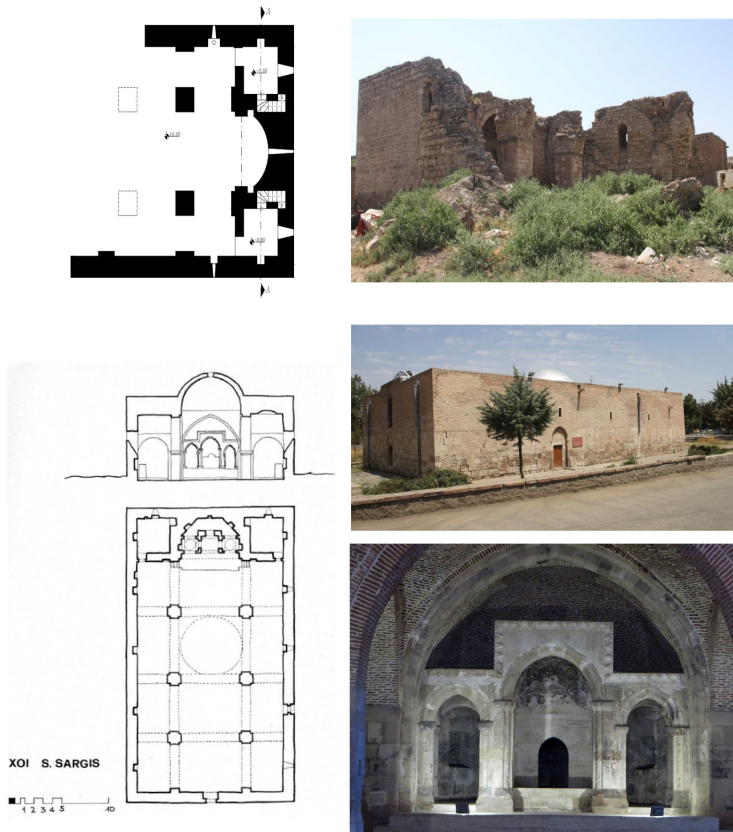


Figure 3 RAA Archive, Upper: Monastery of Derik (plan and exterior of collapsed remains); Lower: St. Sargis Church (plan, section, and exterior/interior views). n.d. Photographs and drawings. Salmast and Khoy, Iran. RAA Archive, copyright

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).

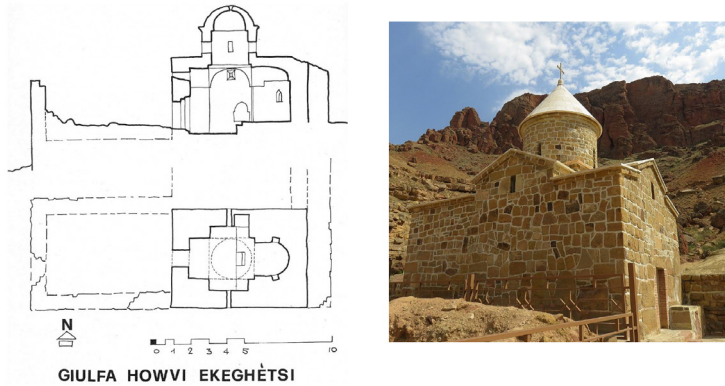


Figure 4 Author, Church of the Shepherd: architectural section, plan, exterior view, interior dome, and altar. n.d. Photographs and drawings. Jolfa, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



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.

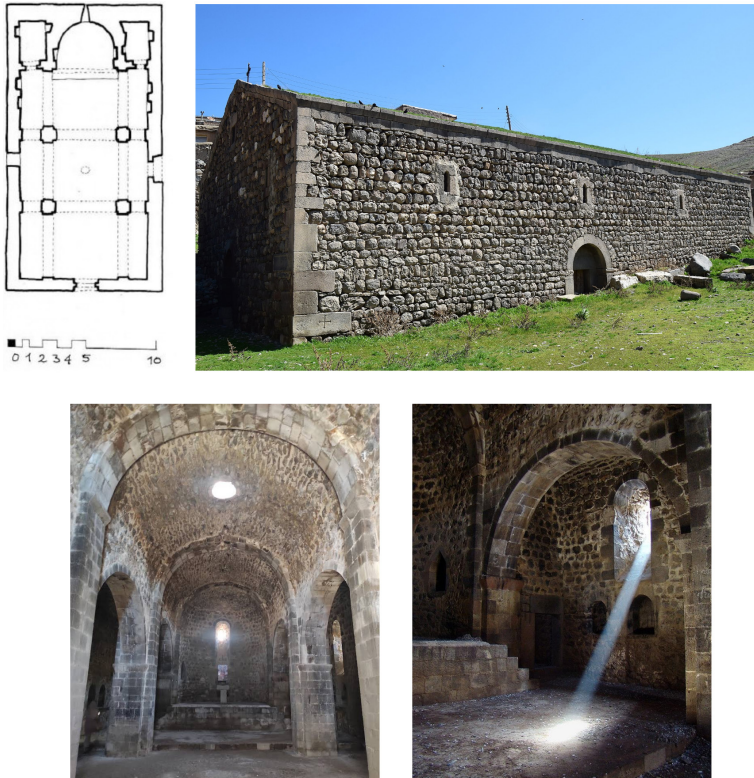


Figure 9 Author, Surp Hripsime Church in Mujumbar: floor plan, exterior view, and interior photos. n.d. Photographs and drawing. Mujumbar, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



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].

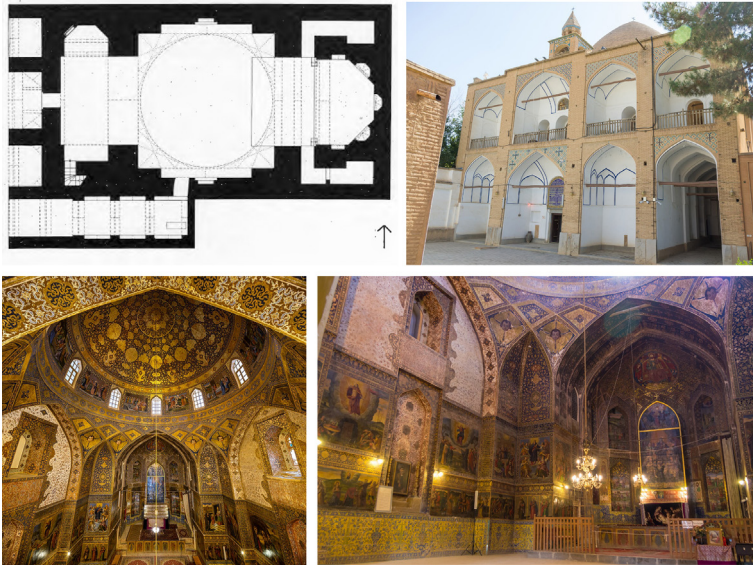


Figure 13 Author, Church of St. Bethlehem: floor plan, exterior view, interior dome, and interior altar. n.d. Photographs and drawing. New Julfa, Isfahan. SHA Archive, copyright

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].

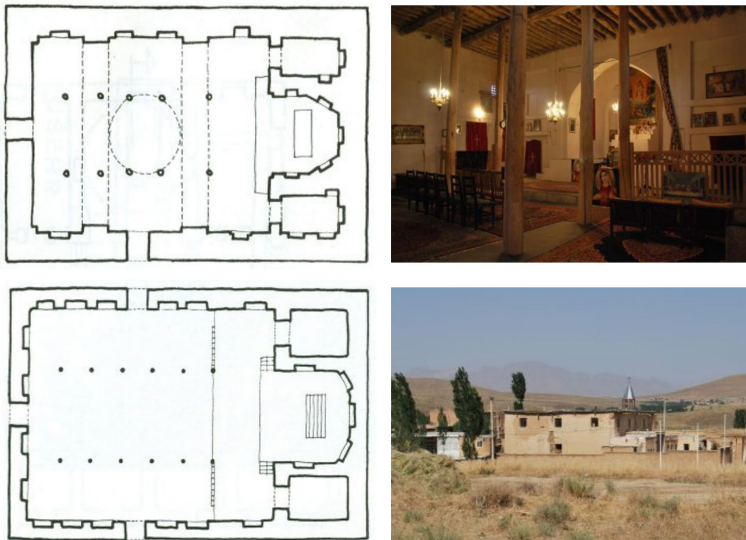


Figure 16 Author, Church of Hezarjarib: architectural floor plans and interior/exterior photographs. n.d. Photographs and drawings. Faridan, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

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).

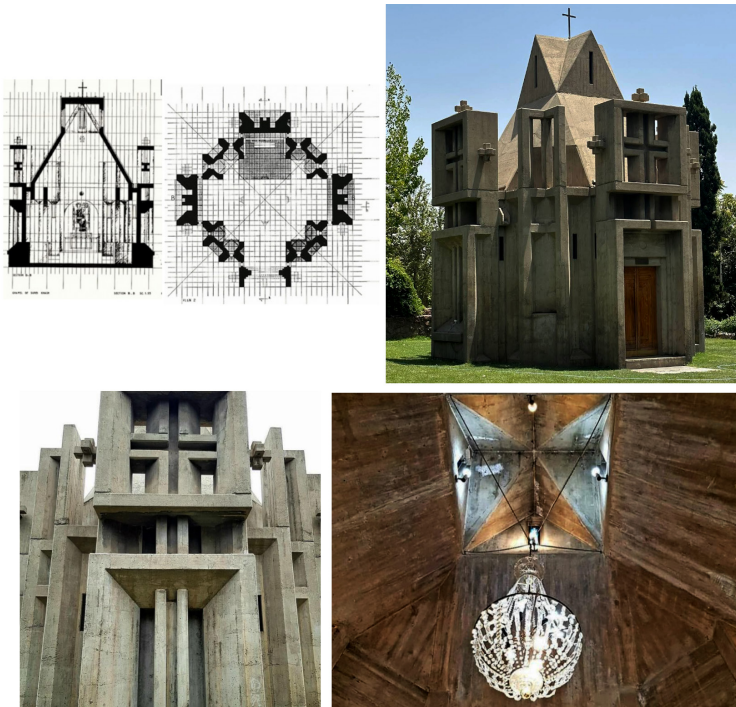


Figure 20 Rostom Voskanian, Surp Khatch Chapel: section and floor drawing, exterior view, detail of exterior decoration, and interior of the dome area. n.d. Photographs and drawings. Tehran, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

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

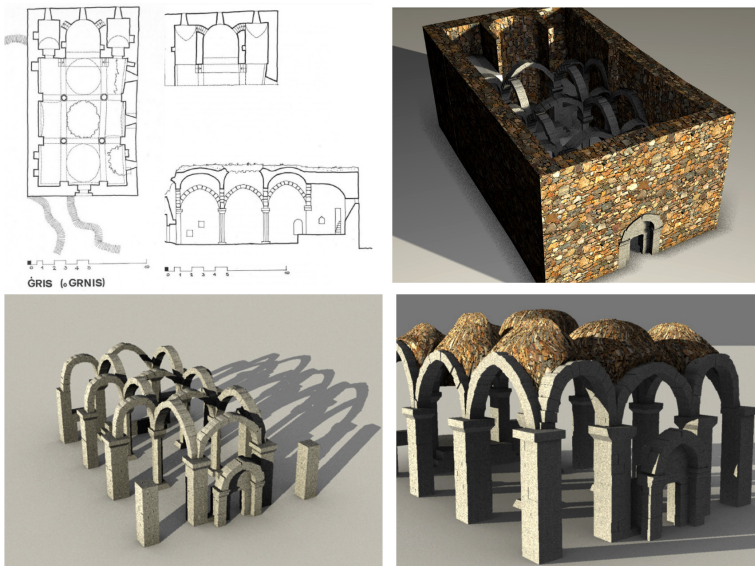


Figure 22 Author, Architectural drawings, 3D digital reconstruction, and diagrams showing the stone structure of the building. n.d. Diagrams and drawings. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

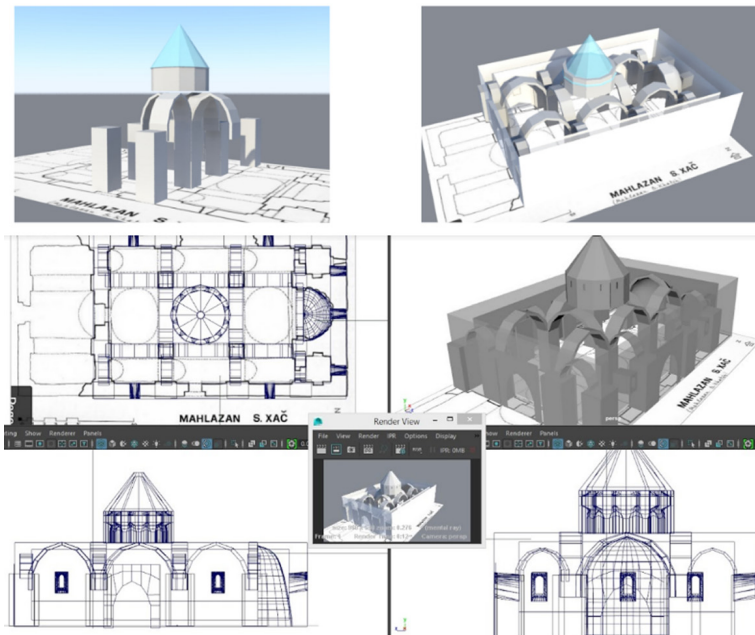


Figure 23 Author, Diagram demonstrating the phases of a 3D digital reconstruction model. n.d. Diagram. SHA Archive, copyright

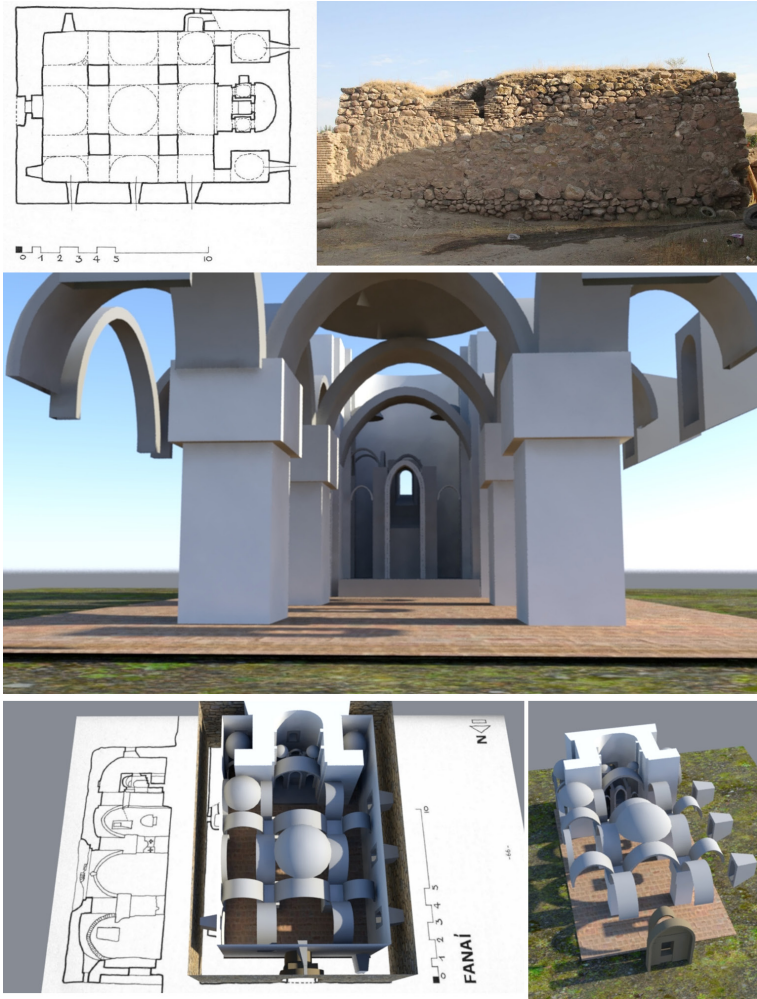


Figure 24 Author, Diagram showing the method used to create the digital 3D model. n.d. Diagram.
SHA Archive, copyright

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The Hyphenated Architect

Armenians and Modernist Architecture in Pahlavi Iran

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Abstract In 2016, my initial question for my next book project began with a relatively simple question: Why did many of the indigenous modernist architects come from Iran's religious minorities at the height of Reza Shah's nationalist reign? Or rather, why did so many young professionals from Armenian, Assyrian, Baha'i, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities choose the field of architecture as their career and shape Iran's urban and middle-class environments? I propose that, unlike other nationalist states in the interwar period, the early Pahlavi pragmatic approach to industrialization relied on the segment of Iranian students who were educated in Western-style institutions founded and run by foreign, missionary, and minority private primary and secondary schools.

Keywords Armenian architects. Gabriel Guevrekian. Vardan Hovhannisian. Paul Apcar. Yougenia Aftandilians.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Interwar Modernists: Guevrekian and Hovhannisian. – 3 Postwar Modernists: Aftandilians, Apcar, and Others.



1 Introduction

It is possible that it was during a warm summer afternoon, amid a sweaty, testosterone-filled basketball game between Le Corbusier, his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, and their friend Gabriel Guevrekian, that the radical idea of *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) was born. According to Guevrekian, these games were a bit awkward because Le Corbusier insisted on wearing his “little wire basket over his good eye” (Johnson, Plautz, Laing 1971, 10). Several years earlier, at age twenty-five, Guevrekian had served as the vice-president of the music section at the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris, where he won the Grand Prix for his Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière. This was followed, in 1926, by the design of his Cubist Garden to complement French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens' Villa Noailles (1928), in Hyeres, southern France (Curtis 1996, 290). His terrace garden for Villa Heim (1930) in Neuilly, for which he also designed the interior and furniture, was completed a year later. In June 1928, Guevrekian co-organized the first meeting of CIAM in the Chateau de la Sarraz, Switzerland, after having introduced the French Swiss patron of the Swiss Werkbund, Hélène de Mandrot, to Le Corbusier (Vitou, Des Houliers, Janneau 1987, 73-76; Mumford 2000, 12).

Twenty-eight architects, not all Europeans as claimed by canonical history, were her guests at the Château de la Sarraz, where they drafted CIAM's manifesto, which aimed to place the new architecture in its “true economic and social environment” (Conrads 1993, 109-13). La Sarraz Declaration outlined their stance on the relationship between architecture and the state. Manifesto point seven: “Architecture's new attitude, according to which it aims of its own volition to re-situate itself within economic reality, renders all claim to official patronage superfluous” (Conrads 1993, 112). Outwardly counterintuitive yet in line with the doctrine of modernism, these architects' determination to situate architecture within a socioeconomic context shaped the discourse that sought to separate design from politics. This call for the profession to divorce from the state, a deceptive rejection of and from politics, endowed political power, ‘of its own volition’, to the modernist architect. Subsequently, prominent architects appealed to heads of state to bring their projects to fruition. Le Corbusier, as Jean-Louis Cohen argues, “systematically tried to create a relationship with leaders above the political machine [...] considering democracy an obstacle to his projects, [preferring] other forms of power” (Cohen, unpublished). The Modern Movement thus mounted an autonomizing discourse, which handed architects the agency to redraft their relationship with political institutions.

From the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, Guevrekian was intensely busy advocating for the modern movement in Europe, seamlessly transcending its rigid and often racist national boundaries and forging connections. Then, as throughout his long and prolific career, he effortlessly shifted from being the francophone 'Guévrekian' to the anglophone 'Guevrekian', all the while maintaining intimate ties to his Armenian heritage, the 'Գեվրեկեան' (Gevrekian) or 'Գեւրիկեան' (Gevrikian) family, now rooted in Tehran as the 'گورکیان' (Gorkian) family.¹ In 1930, Guevrekian, Mallet-Stevens, Henri Sauvage, Auguste Perret, Francis Jourdain, Pierre Chareau, and André Lurçat cofounded the well-known French architectural journal *L'architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. Guevrekian then joined thirty-two architects in Vienna's Werkbund exhibition under the direction of the Jewish Austrian and later Swedish architect, Josef Frank. Opened in June 1932, the exhibition received 100,000 visitors and was praised as "the greatest architectural exhibition in Europe."² In a matter of a few years, Guevrekian had reached such status in the Modern Movement that his minimalist duplex dwelling, as he described as "deux maisons 'Minimum'" (units 10, 12) was featured at the exhibition's center with those designed by Richard Neutra (unit 9) and Adolf Loss (units 13, 15, 17, 19) (Guevrekian CV).

By then, Guevrekian was at home in five languages, geographies, and ecocultures, having been born into an Armenian Apostolic family in Istanbul, raised in Tehran, educated in Vienna, and trained in Paris. Guevrekian's father, Simon, was an Istanbul-born Ottoman-Armenian diamantaire who married Mariam Boli Galstian Guevrekian (1878-1975), a Tehran-born Qajar-Armenian (Hakobian 1975, 3). In Istanbul, they started a family with the 1894 birth of Lyda, followed by that of Gabriel in 1900, in the shadows of Sultan Abdul Hamid II's Hamidian Massacres (1894-97) in the Armenian-populated Eastern Provinces. The birth of their first son prompted Mariam and Simon to relocate to Tehran, adopt Iranian citizenship, and accept Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar's (r. 1896-1907) invitation to serve as a jewelry expert and royal treasurer at the Golestan Palace in 1903 (Vitou, Des Houliers, Janneau 1987, 19). The Guevrekians counted among the 50,000 who eventually found a haven in Qajar Iran in the years that state violence intensified and culminated in the Armenian

1 Guévrekian, "Curriculum Vitae" (CV) in French in the Private Collection of Simon Guevrekian, Pasadena, California, updated, 2; Guevrekian, "Professional Record" in English in the Private Collection of Simon Guevrekian, Pasadena, California, updated, 1; Hakobian 1975, 3; Tehran's AWBS 1975, 45-6, 52; Gabriel Guevrekian Papers, University Archives, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

2 The newspaper *Arbeiterzeitung* in particular; see Anna Stuhlpfarrer, Werkbundsiedlung Wien archives online, <http://www.werkbundsiedlung-wien.at/en/exhibition-1932/the-exhibition-as-media-event/>.

Genocide (1915-23), exterminating 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians, along with a comparable total number of Assyrians, Greeks, and other non-dominant communities.

In Tehran, Gabriel attended the Haykazian boys' school (est. 1870 and renamed Kushesh-Davtian in 1934).³ Although in his private papers Guevrekian remains silent on his primary schooling, we know that, as of 1905, Mariam served on the executive board of Tehran's Armenian Women's Benevolent Society (AWBS, est. 1905), a charitable organization whose main charge was to support Tehran's Armenian schools. Haykazian School was the top educational institution supported by AWBS, over which Mariam presided from 1910 to 1917.⁴ At age nine, Gabriel, accompanied by Lyda, was sent to Vienna to complete secondary education. Under Jewish-descent Austrian architect and designer Oskar Strad – a close collaborator of Josef Frank in establishing the Wiener Schule der Architektur (Vienna School of Architecture), Guevrekian began his architecture education in 1915. In 1919, he earned his "diploma" from, as he notes in his annotated curriculum vitae, "l'École d'Architecture et Arts Décoratifs de Vienne" or the "Academy of Applied Arts, Vienna" (Guevrekian CV). He apprenticed in the architectural firm of Strad, led by Austrian architect Alfred Keller and Austrian-Moravian architect Joseph Hoffmann, from 1919 to 1921, before settling in Paris in 1922 to practice in Sauvage's atelier and then partner with Mallet-Stevens.

In October 1933, the Nazi Party shut down the Bauhaus, while CIAM's fourth congress in Moscow, planned for the same year, was canceled. Despite the success of the 1932 exhibition, the Austrian Werkbund dissolved in 1934. The leading architects of the Modern Movement were fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe: Hans Meyer to the USSR in 1930, Josef Frank to Sweden in 1933, Walter Gropius to the UK in 1934 and then to the United States in 1937, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to the United States in 1937. "At the request of the Persian government, I went to Persia," Guevrekian writes, and "was appointed chief architect of the Municipality of Teheran [sic]" (Guevrekian Professional Record). Upon his arrival in April 1933, Tehran was amid a top-down construction boom, which must have seemed a modernist dream come true. Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41) had demolished large portions of the nineteenth-century Qajar urban fabric, opening a modernist *tabula rasa*. If the tides had turned against

3 Vitou notes that Guevrekian attended "un collège arménien de Téhéran", which is misinterpreted by Khosravi as having attended "the Armenian Junior College in Tehran", an institution that did not exist. See Vitou, Des Houlieries, Janneau 1987, 19; Khosravi 2020, 31.

4 On both the English and French version of his resume, Guevrekian skips the years between 1900 and 1919; see Guévrekian, "Curriculum Vitae," 1; and Guevrekian, "Professional Record", 1. On Mariam Boli Guevrekian, see Berberian, Grigor 2025, 101-2.

the avant-garde architects and artists of Europe, in Iran, the state had embarked on the task of industrializing its economy and creating the “modern middle class” (Abrahamian 1982, 33; Grigor 2025a). Iran, a country as large as France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy combined, and as rich as its vast oil reserves, was ruled by a heavy-handed monarch bent on top-down modernization. Iran of the 1930s was indeed a modernist architectural dream come true.

In 2016, my initial question for my current book project was relatively simple: Why did many of the indigenous modernist architects, such as Guevrekian, come from Iran’s religious minorities at the height of Reza Shah’s nationalist regime? Or rather, why did so many young professionals from Armenian, Assyrian, Baha’i, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities choose the field of architecture as their career and shape Iran’s urban and middle-class environments (Grigor 2017)? I propose that, unlike other nationalisms led by autocratic heads of state in the interwar period, the early Pahlavi pragmatic approach to industrialization in the 1920s relied on the segment of Iranian students who were educated in Western-style institutions founded and run by foreign, missionary, and minority private primary and secondary schools. Alongside the children of Qajar aristocracy, the majority of these came from Iran’s religious minorities. This early Pahlavi push for modernization, which embraced the ‘minor’ architects, often women from religious minorities, created an inadvertent affirmative action ecology in which professionals advocated modernist architecture.

2 Interwar Modernists: Guevrekian and Hovhannisian

The forces of reform and resistance to it had earnestly begun during Naser al-Din Shah Qajar’s (r. 1848-1896) long reign. His ambivalent attitude towards the processes of modernization both fueled political instability and laid the institutional structures upon which Pahlavi modernity would expand. In the 1930s, the agendas of the top-down and bottom-up were aligned. Parsi, Armenian, French Catholic, and American missionary primary schools from the 1880s on, the archeological negations of the 1900s that handed digging rights to the French, the 1935 establishment of Tehran University, the construction boom of the interwar period, the Pahlavi state’s aspiration to a modernist bourgeois taste that would foster the secular middle class, and the demand for professional architects by the state bureaucracy and major industries created a unique historical condition conducive to the expansion of the Modern Movement in Iran. The professional Iranian architect, who emerged as the modernist protagonist, was the first to benefit from and shape this unique historical moment. That the ideology of the Modern Movement – represented by the

manifestos of CIAM and the Bauhaus – was founded upon a *discursive* distance from politics, despite its overwhelming dependence on men of power, further advanced the influential, yet seemingly apolitical, stance of these architects in early Pahlavi Iran.

Despite Naserid reforms, Western-style education in Qajar Iran was introduced by foreign missionaries and philanthropic entities, and it remained the preferred form of schooling until the 1970s (Birašk 1997). Active since the nineteenth century, American missionaries had been unsuccessful in converting Muslims. Instead, they managed to attract other religious minorities through Western-style elementary schools. The first five graduates of the American Presbyterian school in 1891 included three Armenians and two Jews. To prevent conversion, the Jewish, Armenian, and Zoroastrian communities established their own private schools during the Constitutional period, which began to compete with Islamic schools in terms of numbers and standards. In March 1922, the Supreme Council on Education “issued forty-eight licenses for Islamic, forty-nine for Armenian, seven for Zoroastrian, and thirty for Jewish schools” (Birašk 1997). In 1879, the first Armenian elementary school was established in Tabriz, which was expanded in 1909 to become the Armenian Central High School. Starting in 1898, the Alliance Israelite Universelle opened a series of Jewish schools in various cities throughout Iran. Wealthy Parsi philanthropists sponsored the Zoroastrian Firuz Bahram (boys/1932 by Jafar Khan Kashiani) and Anushirvan Dadgar (girls/ca. 1935) schools in Tehran.

Starting in December 1934 with Baha’i schools, Reza Shah’s government shut down missionary and minority schools, including Haykazian, in November 1936 (Berberian 2025, 308; Rostam-Kolayi 2008, 2013). Once nationalized and reopened, most of these schools were legislated to enroll all children regardless of religious affiliation. The missionary schools were excellent in strengthening their national reputation among Iran’s middle-class population and began to attract excellent students from secular-leaning families of all backgrounds. Samuel Jordan’s American Presbyterian school was bought by the Iranian government in 1940 to become the famed Alborz College. Others, such as the French Catholic and lay schools, including St. Louis, Alliance Française, Jeanne d’Arc, Institute Maryam, and Lycée Razi, similarly reorganized and continued to operate as top private schools (Hadidi 2000). Most of the Pahlavi political and cultural elite, including almost all the architects presented here, began their education in these minority or missionary schools, where they mingled and formed shared worldviews. By the time Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-79) took the throne, a new generation of a professional class was emerging.

State violence in the Ottoman and Romanov empires, as well as the gradual influx of Armenian architects into Qajar Iran, meant that by

the time Reza Shah embarked on his massive infrastructural reforms, many Armenian architects were already enlisted in state and private projects as leading architects and engineers. Tabriz welcomed several prominent Western-classical-trained Armenian architects, including the graduate of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts and chief architect of Yerevan, Alexander Tamanian (1878-1936) and Avetis Ohanianian (1882-1950), after their mass exile, freeing Yerevan with the Bolshevik takeover of the First Republic of Armenia (1918-1920). Ohanianian, a Tomsk Polytechnic University-trained architect-engineer and the former Armenian Minister of Urban Planning, designed Tabriz's main avenue, the Golestan green urban area, and the City Hall [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Avetis Ohanianian and contractor Haj Mohammad, Municipality Building or the City Hall. 1935-39. Tabriz, Iran. Source: private collection of Emmanuel Ohanianian and courtesy of Aida Ohanianian

His children, Victoria (1929-2023) and Emmanuel (1921-2015), later joined other Irano-Armenian architects with their prolific careers. The history of several other early Pahlavi era Irano-Armenian architects - including Royal College of Art-trained architect Margar Galstian (1888-1965, Central Post Office with Tiflis-born Russian architect Nikolai Markov, 1934); Hovhannes Onik Gharibian (Reza Shah's Marble Palace, 1937 in Ramsar, Mazandaran [fig. 2]); the Tiflis-born Christofer Tadevosian (1905-1992); Université de Paris-trained urban planner Ervand Budaghian (b. 1908); and Ghalitch Baqian (n/d), who collaborated with French-trained engineer Levon Tadevosian (1898-1980) to erect the four buildings

of the Hasanabad Square (1920-30s), as well as later the Police Headquarters (1933) – remains unrecorded (Lazaryan 2012, 234-42; Grigor 2021, 200-5; Zanicchkah, Razeghi 2022, 365). Most of these architects designed and built in the neoclassical style, compelled by both their training and the state-societal taste of the first three decades of the twentieth century.



Figure 2 Hovhannes Onik Gharibian, Marble (marmar) Palace for Reza Shah. 1937. Ramsar, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Talinn Grigor, 2006

Therefore, upon his 1933 return to Iran, Guevrekian was the first Iranian architect with direct ties and experience with Europe's Modern Movement, and remained one of its few representatives until Vardan Hovhannisian's return from Paris two years later. They brought with them not only the aesthetic and socio-economic tenets of the International Style but also CIAM's discourse, which separated architecture from political patronage. They, thus, later found themselves in a conundrum under the iron fist of Reza Shah. The reformist ministers enlisted Guevrekian in their undertakings, where he took charge of the projects of the Tehran municipality. The mastermind of the 1928 Civil Code, Justice Minister Ali Akbar Davar, was an advocate of rapid economic growth. In an editorial of his own newspaper, *Mard-e azad* (Free man), he had argued in 1923, "We have 6,000 years of history, but that will not translate into factories, railroads, hospitals or schools" (Ghani 1998, 296). In 1935, he appointed Guevrekian as head of the technical department of his finance ministry to oversee state construction in Tehran.

Within four short but decisive years, Guevrekian erected some two-dozen structures in Tehran, almost all on the principles of the Modern Movements. As of his arrival in 1933, he completed a model of a new state theatre (1933 model). The following year, he proposed an elongated, multi-part structure for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with two proposals in 1934 and 1936, which was constructed on a modified scheme between March 1934 and May 1939 [fig. 3]. Lifted on concrete *pilotis*, his proposal for the Ministry of Industries (1936) rose to seven stories of horizontal openings on its impressive façade. In the design of the justice ministry (1937 drawings), also attributed to Guevrekian, we witness an uneasy negotiation between Guevrekian's avant-garde tenets, and a neoclassical aesthetic preferred by the state. The austere modernist façade and the symmetrical body, flanked by two courtyards, were reluctantly decorated with duplicates of Sassanian reliefs.



Figure 3 Gabriel Guevrekian with Roland Dubulle, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 1934-39. Tehran, Iran.
Source: Ali Khadem Collection, courtesy of Farrokh Khadem and Cyrus Samii

Unlike state projects, Guevrekian willed the greatest freedom during the design of the upper-middle-class villas, as he had done in France and Austria. These were the spaces of avant-garde experimentation, commissioned by patrons who insisted on showcasing their own modernity. One for each year that he worked in Iran: Villa Panahi (1934), Villa Siassi (1935), Villa Malak Aslani (1935), Villa Khosravani (1936), and Villa Firuz (1937) (Vitou, Des Houliers, Janneau 1987, 6-11; Guevrekian Papers; Karimi 2013, 60-66). The Modern Movement

rematerialized in the suburbs of northern Tehran, characterized by open plans, large minimalist openings, *pilotis* supporting balconies and cantilevers, and white walls. Each was also in an intimate dialogue with the gardens that he must have also designed. Like the Justice Ministry, Guevrekian's Officers' Club must not have been what the architect wanted; it seems to have been a compromise between the sovereignty of modern architecture and its reliance on the state. After objecting to the heavy-handed demands of the state, Guevrekian's final departure from Iran coincided with the suspicious suicide of Davar in 1937. When Guevrekian returned to Europe in the same year, Hovhannisian took over the completion of the Officers' Club (1934-39) [fig. 4].



Figure 4 Gabriel Guevrekian with Vardan Hovhannisian, Officers' Club. 1934-39. Tehran, Iran.
Source: Ali Khadem Collection, courtesy of Farrokh Khadem and Cyrus Samii

Guevrekian and Hovhannisian first met in Henri Sauvage's atelier in 1922. A few years later, Hovhannisian visited Guevrekian's first prominent work, the Jardin d'Eau et de Lumière, at the exposition of 1925, where he also saw Le Corbusier's *Esprit Nouveau* and Konstantin Mel'nikov's Soviet Pavilion. Considered one of the most prolific architects of the interwar period, he spent sixteen years in Paris, first at the École des Beaux Arts, and then switching to architecture at the École Spéciale d'Architecture in 1919. In 1923, he began working for Sauvage before opening his own firm. Much of his design effort went into post-war reconstruction, but he stayed active within the Iranian community as a founding member of the Society of Iranians Living in France (Hovhannisian 1946, 4-9). The second

architect who had advocated the Modern Movement and had returned from Paris in June 1935, Hovhannisian shared with Guevrekian his commitment to the Modern Movement, though he was far more adaptable in his practice to Iran and its apolitical discourse. Due no doubt to Europe's crumbling economy and a looming war, in June 1935, Hovhannisian wrote to Ala, then Iran's ambassador in London, and expressed his wish to return to Iran and work as an architect (Soroushiani, Daniel, Shafei 2008). On July 6 of the following month, Ala assured Hovhannisian that introduction letters had been sent to Tehran's Mayor, Education Minister Hakimi, and Prime Minister Forughi, whose son must have been friends with Hovhannisian in Paris. While he was offered a governmental post in the technical department of the National Police, like all the other architects who would return after him, Hovhannisian also submitted proposals for various competitions for public and private projects.



Figure 5 Vardan Hovhannisian, Girls' Art College. 1935-38. Tehran, Iran. Source: Soroushiani, S.; Daniel, V; Shafei, B. (2008). *Vartan Hovanesian Architecture: Architecture of Changing Times in Iran*. Tehran: Did Publications, 45

Hovhannisian was well prepared for his first project, the Girls' Art College (*honarestan-e dokhtaran*, 1935-38) [fig. 5], as he had paid for his own education by teaching in Armenian schools before leaving for Paris. Here, he designed a structure that served the needs of secular education for the advancement of women. He employed modernist language, characterized by elongated horizontal openings that intersected with façade-length vertical windows at the corners, cantilevered staircases that appeared to sit on strips of glass, classrooms that extended into balconies, and concrete bands protruding from windows and rooflines.

The façade, although designed on a symmetrical plan, was given a volumetric distinction through a skillful, balanced interplay between positive and negative components.

In the issues of the first professional journal, *Architecte*, owned by Iraj Moshiri, Hovhannisian published “Issues Related to Architecture in Iran,” advocating modernism in opposition to the Reza Shah-era Persian revivalism (Hovhannisian 1946, 4-9; Grigor 2021). He also proposed his seven points for Iranian modern architecture:

1. Horizontal and corner openings;
2. Vertical openings wrapping around staircases;
3. Concrete projections on façade;
4. Cantilever staircases;
5. Concrete projections above openings;
6. Concrete projections above the roofline;
7. Wooden doors for interior.



Figure 6 Vardan Hovhannisian, renderings of the Train Station and Cinema Diana. Tehran, Iran.
Source: *Peydayesh me' mari-ye modern dar Iran: Yadnameh-ye Vartan Hovanesian 1275-1361*.
Tehran: Nashrie-ye Jam'e-ye Moshaveran-e Iran, no. 1, Spring 1983, 10-11

In 1935, Reza Shah commissioned Hotel Darband (1938) on the slopes of the Alborz Mountains in northern Tehran, which was “to strike a new note of elegance with its accommodations, restaurant, and casino” (Wilber 1986). As I have argued elsewhere, this set of commissions was a part of the broader Pahlavi middle-class architecture of leisure and tourism (Grigor 2009; 2025a). Hotel Darband remained “a favorite of Tehran’s high society” until the revolution (Kadivar 2001). This was followed by a series of hotels and motels in the heart of the capital:

Railway Hotel (1940), Laleh Motel (1945), and Ferdowsi Hotel (1949). Flanking these modernist structures were his Cinema Diana (1940s), Cinema Crystal (1945), and Cinema Metropole (1946) [fig. 6]. They represented a society in transition, one where technology and leisure were housed in explicitly modernistic yet informal public architecture.

3 Postwar Modernists: Aftandilians, Apcar, and Others

With a solid architectural education and often a long residency in Europe, Guevrekian and Hovhannisian were followed by a number of young architects who returned to Iran in the late-1930s and after to partake in two conflicting agendas: bottom-up – to establish a sovereign architectural profession on the principles of the Modern Movement, including its apolitical discourse – and top-down – to join the state structures to build the spaces of the rising secular bourgeoisie. As the protagonists of the modern middle class, these architects often found themselves in the precarious position between a heavy-handed government, with which they often shared ideology and method of implementation, and their own avant-garde spirit to practice without authoritarian interference. While relying on state patronage for state projects, they tried to maintain aloofness by developing an architectural discourse that divorced their craft from political plots and intrigues. As did Mies during his leadership of the Bauhaus, they insisted that their work had nothing to do with politics. In the first editorial of the first Iranian architectural journal, Iraj Moshiri, proclaimed in September 1946, “The *Architecte* is purely a technological and aesthetic publication, which cannot and does not wish to have the slightest involvement with the world of politics” (Iradj Moshiri, *Architecte* 1 1946): 1-3). This ambivalent position of architects was crucial to the survival of the architectural profession as an independent practice, pivotal not only to their livelihood but also to the nation-building project. It was an anxiety felt by many and articulated by others.

Hovhannisian advocated the Modern Movement and its apolitical design principle by criticizing the historicist “national” style designed by European architects and *me’mars*. In *Architecte*, he asked, “Should we imitate the past and renew the valuable works of the past, or should we look to the future and adapt architecture to the new way of life?” (Hovhannisian 1946, 6). Fervently rejecting any kind of revivalism and eclecticism, including André Godard’s Iran-bastan Museum, Maxime Siroux’s National Library, H. Heinrich’s National Bank, Markov’s Alborz College and post office with Galstian, Karim Taherzadeh Behzad’s northern façade of the Parliament (1935) and Ferdowsi’s mausoleum (1934) design in cooperation with Godard (Soroushiani, Daniel, Shafei 2005; Grigor 2021). To an avant-garde architect like Hovhannisian, all these attempts at being modern yet Iranian were

dubious. He poked fun at the neo-Achaemenid facades rhetorically asking, “Stop it, don’t you want to turn Tehran into a zoo? What is the point of so many statues of lions, cows, etc.?” (Hovhannisian 1946, 6).

What made the modern Iranian architect a sovereign professional personage possible was a sovereign national education system, the foundations of which were already set in the late Qajar period. Architectural education in Pahlavi Iran has its roots in the diplomatic negotiations between various Qajar monarchs and European powers at the turn of the century. Those regarding archaeological excavations were particularly significant to the eventual development of the architectural profession in the 1950s. In August 1890, Naser al-Din Shah signed a treaty that “conceded to the French Republic the exclusive and perpetual right to excavate in the entire expanse of the empire”.⁵ The agreement laid the grounds for the French monopoly not only over Iran’s archaeological excavations but also over the education of archeologists, artists, and architects. In 1927, when Reza Shah’s government renegotiated with the agreement, the French Republic appointed Godard to the Antiquities Services, who also directed Tehran University’s Faculty of Fine Arts from 1935 to 1949 (Grigor 2009). Despite the modernist campus, the first decade of the university was unsuccessful. Education Minister Ali Asghar Hekmat, who had presented the idea to the *majles* in May 1934, had faced objections on the basis that “Iran was still not adequately endowed with primary and secondary institutions” to support such an institution (Catanzaro 2013, 43). Many of the first students had matriculated in missionary or minority private schools, particularly those in the field of art and architecture.

For individual young members of these religious minorities, like those Parsis of the British Raj at the end of the nineteenth century, to be a religious minority within the larger matrix of a nation-state was to have found themselves in a historical position that enabled turning marginality into privilege. By removing themselves from local identity politics, they participated in the Modern Movement’s universal apolitics. A secular primary and secondary education at home had shaped their bilingual and multi-perspectival outlook towards the world, which naturally led to Europe and later to the United States. Once schooled in Europe, these architects eagerly returned to Iran where they found, so to speak, the best of both worlds: economic posterity, supportive communities, rich and often healthy social lives, comfortable material lives, favorable social mobility, a functioning patriarchy, and abundant and secure sources of income – in short, a unique historical moment that was also produced in some degree

⁵ Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Direction des Affaires politiques et commerciales Asie-Océanie 1919-1929, Perse 66, Fouilles archéologiques, E387-3, 17, 11, dated August 1900, Paris, France.

of their own agency. The conditions of modernity were social spaces of intervention and interaction that they had helped create. The demand for these young professionals was immense in all the sectors of the rapidly developing economy: the technical departments of the governmental ministries, the powerful National Iranian Oil Company, the shah's vast Plan Organization with its five-year programs, the numerous engineering and contracting firms, the oil and gas industries, the petrochemical industry, not to mention the various urban renewal and utopian schemes of the late Mohammad Reza Shah period.

Paul Apcar (1909-1970), who attended Tehran's St. Louis primary school before leaving for Orléans to complete his high school education and graduate from École Saint-Luc Supérieure des Arts in Brussels, was an advocate of the Modern Movement, like Guevrekian and Hovhannisian. After his return to Iran in 1937, he designed the Radio Station (1940) [fig. 7], Niagara Cinema (1959), and numerous finance ministry offices, commercial buildings, and private residences, where many of his clients were Armenians, including Babajanian, Muradian, Sarkisian, Stepanian, and Shatikian (Shafi'i, Surushiyan, Daniel 2015).

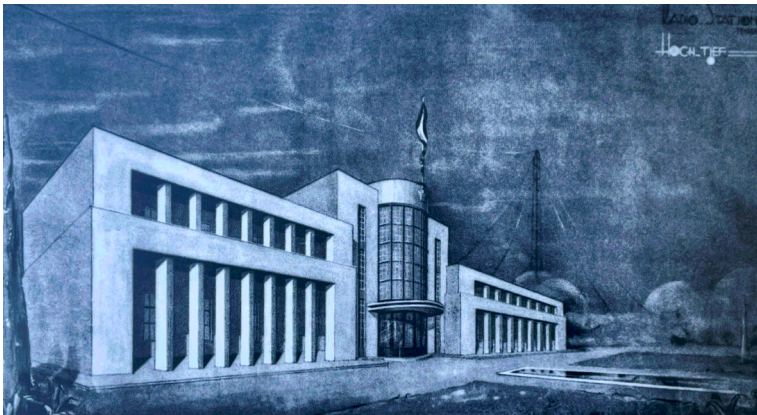


Figure 7 Paul Apcar, isometric drawing of the principal elevation of Radio Station. 1940. Tehran, Iran.
Source: Shafei, B.; Soroushiani, S.; Daniel, V. (2015). *Me'mari-e Pul Abkar / Paul Apcar: Architecture*.
Tehran: Sazman-e Asnad va Ketabkhaneh-ye Milli-e Jomhuri-e Islami-e Iran, 99

One of the leading heads of Tehran University's architectural atelier, Tabriz- or Astrakhan-born architect from a Russo-Armenian family, Yougenia (Eugene) 'Zhenia' Aftandilians (1914-1998) was the prolific architect of some of the major state and private commissions in Iran. His principal edifices in Tehran included the Rudaki "Opera House" (1967), the Russian Hospital (1969) along with three other major hospitals, Museum of Anthropology (1965), Saint Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Cathedral (1963), Hosayniyeh Ershad Mosque (1968),

Golden City Cinema (1969), and Ministry of Arts and Culture's galleries and the amphitheater (1977) [fig. 8].⁶

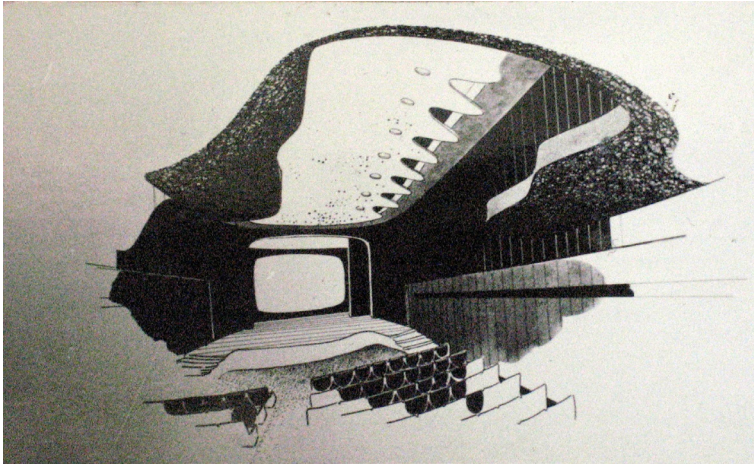


Figure 8 Yougenia (Eugene) Aftandilians, renderings of the Ministry of Arts and Culture's galleries and the amphitheater. 1977. Tehran, Iran. Source: Grigor Nazarian private collection and courtesy

More than any other Irano-Armenian architect, Aftandilians' most significant contribution to Iranian modern architecture was as the atelier head at the flagship architectural faculty at Tehran University. Starting in 1958, he trained multiple generations of Iranian architects, among whom were many Armenians, including Grigor Nazarian (b. 1937), Lucy Mnatsakanian Nazarian (b. 1938), and Aspet Davidian (b. 1940) (Nazarians interview 2024; Davidian interview 2024).

By the mid-1950s, an influential community of modernist intelligentsia emerged from within the margins of Iranian society. The new organizational sensibility, within the Iranian bureaucracy and education, had recalibrated the ethical and aesthetic values of the new elite. Among those who left their distinct mark on Iran's modern art and architecture during this period, a disproportionate number came from religious minorities. Pioneers of modernism in Iranian art, Marcos Grigorian (1925-2007) and Hannibal Alkhas (1930-2010), were Armenian and Assyrian, respectively. Directing Tehran University's architectural faculty, Irano-Baha'i architect Hushang Seyhun (1920-2014) designed a network of national mausolea, including those of Ibn Sina/Avicenna in Hamadan (1952), Nader Shah in Mashhad (1959), Kamal al-Molk and

6 In the resume, it is listed as "Principle Building, Ministry of Art and Culture", Yougenia Aftandilians, "Personal Resume", in the Private Collection of Roubik Aftandilians, Glendale, California, undated, 1-2.

Omar Khayyam in Nishapur (1962-63), along with a long list of other modernists edifices, including Asia Cinema (1958) (Seyhun interview 2000; Amanat interview 2000; Grigor 2009, 2025a). Davoud Oshana (1929-2014), with several modernist villas in northern Tehran as well as two Assyrian churches, was an Assyrian. Commissioned by Alborz-graduate Harmik Hovnanian, the Hovnanian House on Vozara Avenue (1970, mistakenly known as Rafizadeh house) [fig. 9] was designed by Levon Babayan (1927-2014) and completed by Norair Pishtofjian (1931-2020) (Hovnanian Der Grigorian interview 2025; and Pishtofjian interview 2025). Rostom Voskanian (1932-2013), the architect of the 10,000-seat Ararat Sports and Cultural Complex (1971-76) [fig. 10] in Vanak, northern Tehran, along with a dozen other works, was a Tabriz-born Armenian (Voskanian interviews; Grigor 2014). In 1975, Armenian-Italian architect Armen Gurekian (b. 1938), the grandson of Ottoman Armenian architect and activist Léon Gurekian (1871-1950), won the bid to design the Tochal Ski Resort (1975-77), on the Tehran side of the Alborz Mountain range (Gurekian interview 2022). Intended to attract European winter tourists, this megaproject allocated the ground floor to all-pedestrian circulation, concealing mechanized transportation underground [fig. 11]. In preparation for the proposal's presentation to Empress Farah and the Shah, Gurekian called on Voskanian's assistance. Yet, like many other Pahlavi future-facing large schemes, it was aborted in 1977 due to the advent of the Iranian Revolution.



Figure 9 Levon Babayan and Norair Pishtofjian, Hovnanian House on Vozara Avenue. 1970. Tehran, Iran. Source: Moneh Hovnanian Der Grigorian private collection and courtesy

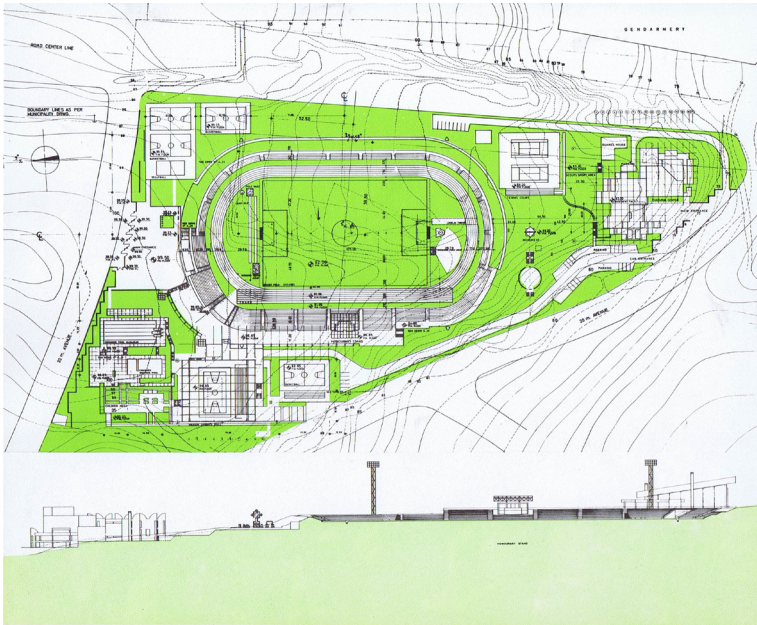


Figure 10 Rostom Voskanian, master plan of Ararat Sport Stadium. 1977. Northern Tehran, Iran.
Source: Greg Der Grigorian private collection and courtesy



Figure 11 Armen Gurekian, rendering for Tochal Ski Resort proposal. 1975-77. Velenjak, Iran.
Source: Armen Gurekian private collection and courtesy

Many more women, including poet and film director Forugh Farrokhzad (1934-1967), artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1922-2019), and artist and gallery owner Massumeh Noushin Seyhun (1934-2010), were prominent figures among the advocates of modernist artistic expressions. Alongside Armenian diasporic global networks and missionary activities in Iran, Armenian women's organizations had been champions of girls' Western-style education since 1871, when the first Armenian women's organization was founded in Tehran (Berberian, Grigor 2025). The pioneering forgotten history of Irano-Armenian women architects, among whom the first female graduate of Tehran University, Nectar Papazian Andreeff (1924-2020), followed by Victoria Ohanjaian-Fard (1929-2023), Rosa Mirzayan (1931-2012), Emma Toulou Hacıopians Grigorian (1930-2025), Veronik Vardanian Saginian (1930-2015), and Mnatsakanian Nazarian, is an essential part of not only my current book project but also the Pahlavi story of modernization and these pioneering, hyphenated architects (Grigor 2025b, 2025c, 2027).

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Preserving Armenian Art and Architecture in Twenty-First Century Iran

The Case Study of Churches in Western Azerbaijan

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Abstract The paper intends to test the current degree of conservation of the Armenian churches in Salmas and Khoy territories, and to define a set of possible interventions in their safeguard and conservation. The study faces the problems of the structural and material degradation of buildings, provides a critical approach to the ongoing interventions, and proposes a set of intervention criteria in restoration, reuse and management. Today, whereas the population of Armenian origin is nearly disappeared. Consequently it will be necessary to involve also with the population currently established in these territories.

Keywords Armenian Churches. Architectural Conservation. West Azerbaijan Tourism. New Uses for Old Buildings. International Cooperation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Degradation Problems. – 3 Problems of Legal Protection. – 4 Some Conservation Problems. – 5 New Uses. – 6 Possible Forms of Reuse and Recovery. – 7 A Modest Proposal.

1 Introduction

As far as the churches of the Khoy and Salmas regions, this might be a crucial element for their survival, since at least two of them could be easily involved in an expansion of the UNESCO site which includes the two monasteries: they are the Saint George church in Haftvan and Saint George church in Khoy that, in addition to their important historical and architectural value, being in the vicinity of two important towns (Khoy and Salmas) would be well suited to host an exhibition structure and a small documentation / information centre to support a visit of the whole region.

However, many other churches remain in the two provinces (in some cases only ruins), and they require other methods of protection and new uses.

A mission impossible?

When I was asked for the title and abstract of my paper, I wondered if what I wanted to say was not too optimistic a proposal. Today, with what is happening in the Middle East, I would be inclined to say that there is no chance of success, at least in the short term. Why, despite everything, am I presenting this paper now? Because I know many people (not governments), on all sides involved, who are firmly convinced that a collaboration is still possible and that we must be ready when the political situation will allow it.

In recent years I have had the opportunity to carry out some studies on these topics, in three succeeding missions, the first in May 2016, the second in October 2017, and the third in October 2018. The last two were financed and implemented on behalf of the Salmast Heritage Association (SHA) with the help of professor Farhad Teherani and other Iranian friends. The results of these missions were published in 2021 (Boriani, Giambruno 2021)

This paper is intended to analyze and test the current degree of conservation of the Armenian and Assyrian religious buildings in Salmas and Khoy territories, and to define a set of possible interventions in their protection, conservation and use. It is based on previous research by Alpago Novello in 1976-77 (Alpago Novello et al. 1977; Alpago Novello et al. 1978) and SHA in 2017 (SHA 2017) as well as on documents (photos and a number of onsite sketches) from my recent missions.

As said, the starting point was the systematic work developed by the mission coordinated by professor Alpago Novello. This work was published in Italian in two volumes of limited international diffusion. We referred to these volumes about churches names, dating of buildings, floor plans, descriptions of typological and architectural characters [figs 1-3].



Figure 1 Ghalasar, S.Sargis. 1977. © Alpago Novello A.



Figure 2 Mahlam S.Gevorg. 1977. © Alpago Novello A.

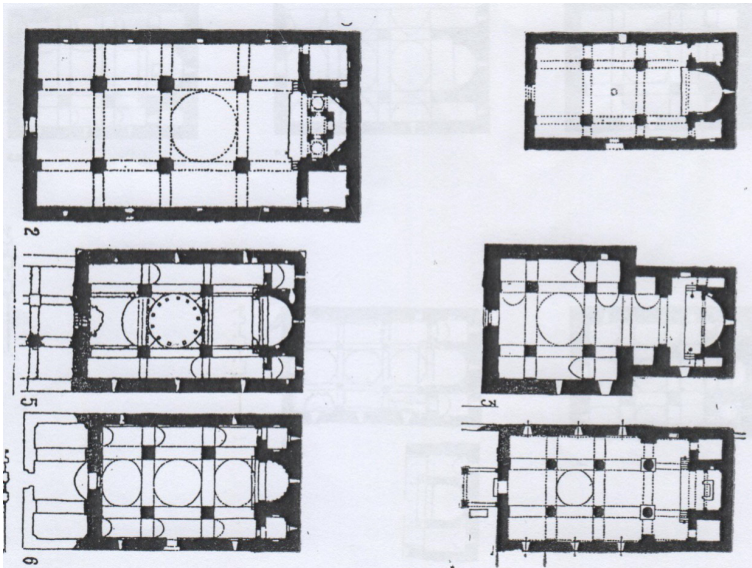


Figure 3 Alpago Novello, Plans of some churches in stone ashlars. 1977. © Alpago Novello A.

My research compares the 1977 state of the buildings to the 2018 situation, both referring to its evolution during the three-year duration of my missions. Survey fields were the same buildings testified in the two books from Alpago mission, yet limited to the territories of Salmas and Khoy, but involving also some Assyrian (Catholic) churches. Not all the buildings recorded in the SHA Catalogue are included in the present study. Here we rather focused on the ones that, starting from the available documentation, looked like the most interesting either by an architectural or historical point of view, and potentially fit for their involvement in a real estate enhancement policy. The buildings neglected by the present study are unfortunately reduced to few ruins and though surely interesting in historical and archaeological terms, they are mostly uninteresting for a conservation and reuse project, even though they still stand important by an archaeological point of view [fig. 4].

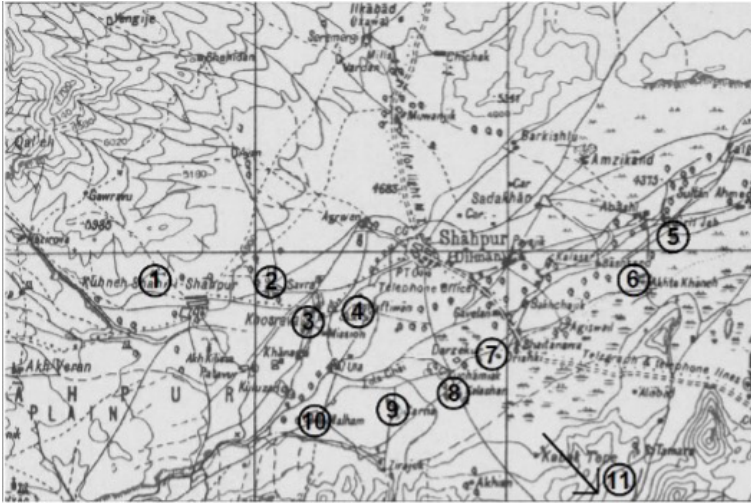


Figure 4 Location of the villages of the Counties of Salmas and Urmia visited during the missions:
1. Kohneshahr, 2. Savra, 3. Khosrova, 4. Haftvan, 5. Ghalasar, 6. Ghezleja, 7. Akhtekhaneh, 8. Drishk, 9. Sarna,
10. Malham, 11. Gharabagh, 12. Jamalabad, 13. Payajuk © USA Army map of Iranian Azerbaijan, 1943.
USA Library of Congress (map) and Boriani M. (locations)

2 Degradation Problems

The study carried out faces the problems of the structural and material degradation of buildings, provides a critical approach to the ongoing interventions, and proposes a set of intervention criteria in conservation, reuse and recovery.

Materials used for building were adobe, kagil plaster and roofing in wood for the poorest churches while the best buildings were made of regular or rough ashlar of stone, both for the walls, arches and vaults.

In this paper I will show some images as records of the main ongoing degradation phenomena, which can be summarized as follows:

- the erosion caused by the rain or rising damp from the ground;
- cracks pattern;
- no box-like behaviour, very dangerous in case of earthquakes;
- domes and vaulted roofs collapsed;
- vandalism and illegal excavations;
- animal infestation - garbage;
- plaster and molding detachments, chromatic alteration, erosion and superficial deposits.

I present here some images [figs. 5-7] that document the various forms of degradation found.



Figure 5 Dirshk S.Sargis cracks in the east wall. 2018. © Boriani M.



Figure 6 Ghzelja S.Hovhannes, no box-like behavior. 2018. © Boriani M.



Figure 7 Akhtekhaneh S.Astvatstatsin, erosion of the top caused by the rain and rising damp from the ground © Boriani M.

3 Problems of Legal Protection

Contrary to what one might think, Armenian churches, from a legal point of view, enjoy a fair amount of protection in Iran. As already said, two important monasteries and some annexes have been protected by the UNESCO Convention (World Heritage).

As required by UNESCO World Heritage, the two monasteries of Saint Stephanos and Saint Thaddeus (Kara Kilise) are also protected by an adequate buffer zone, taking into account that these monumental complexes are very popular during crowded pilgrimages.

The buildings included in the World Heritage have been the subject of important restorations carried out by the Iranian Center for Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation (ICTHO) (Karimi 2021).

The Armenian churches of Khoy/Salmas region protected by law from the Iranian government are not few: among the 18 churches studied in this paper as many as 8 were registered between 1998 and 2006, 4 in the Khoy region (Malhazan - S.Khateh [Sargis]; Gris - S.Astvatsatsin; Khoy - S.Sarkis; Fanai - S.Sarkis), and 4 in the Salmas region (Salmas, Haftvan - S.Gevorg; Akhtekhaneh - S.Astvatsatsin; Ghezelja - S.Hovhannes; Mahlam - S.Gevorg).

Among the ten unprotected buildings, seven are ruins which however deserve to be preserved (all, except Qoruq, in the Salmas region:

Drishik - S.Sargis; Ghalasar - S.Sargis; Khosrova - Mar Givargis an Assyrian church; Mahlam - S.Zoravar; Sarnaq - S.Avatatzin; Payadjuk - S.Gevorg; Qoruq - dedication unknown; and three are small adobe chapels: Khoneshar. S.Hakob; S.Sargis) (Karimi 2021).

Some of those churches have recently been the object of restoration interventions, some of which were still ongoing or interrupted for fund lack, at the moment of my surveys. In Haftvan Surp Gevorg church the architectural restoration was practically complete at the time of my last visit, while work was still underway on some interesting early nineteenth century paintings.

In Akhtekhane S.Astvatsatsin church some restorations of the front wall looked in progress during our visits, even though probably interrupted waiting new funding.

Other important works are related to the Malhazan S.Khateh (S.Sargis) church, a building attended as pilgrimage end until short ago. Here the dome has been restored along with and the eastern wall and the interior, even if with questionable interventions. The roof has been waterproofed with bituminous sheath [figs 8, 9].

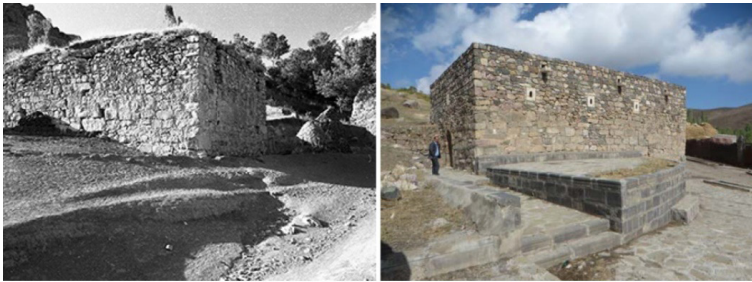


Figure 8 Gris, S.Astvatsatsin, before (1977) and after restoration (2017)
© Alpago Novello A.; Boriani M.



Figure 9 Mahlasan, S.Sargis (S.Kateh), before (1976) and after restoration (2018)
© Alpago Novello A.; Boriani M.

4 **Some Conservation Problems**

The worst preserved churches are made in adobe: a material needing continuous maintenance particularly in a territory where rare but strong autumn rains quickly wash away the hardly protected walls. In such cases, regarded as 'less important' by local authorities, the few interventions I have been able to observe are due to the goodwill of some local residents. Where those interventions are lacking, I could observe a quick decay of those buildings along my three missions.

I do not mean to judge in this occasion the nature of the restoration of past or current interventions: in comparison to the European standards some criticism could be advanced, yet ungenerous if we took into account the economic and technical difficulties, and the international isolation faced today by the local restorers.

As said, Armenian population has almost completely disappeared from this territory, so there is a lack of clarity about who today is the owner of the buildings. Their ownership is claimed by the Bishopric of Tabriz, which however is not able to intervene, alone, in the defence of a heritage too vast compared to its resources.

It is true that some of the most important churches are protected by law, but a large part of this Heritage is left to itself, sometimes with attempts to misappropriation.

Several buildings have historical interest but low architectural quality. As already said, the same restorations underway by the local government are often interrupted due to lack of adequate funding, leaving unfinished interventions, including urgent ones. The state of abandonment of many Armenian churches naturally raises the problem of their reuse, without which a maintenance or restoration would appear to be unsustainable.

The severest problem to be faced is the strong seismicity of the territory where the churches are placed. Western Azerbaijan is a strong seismic area (Berberian, Tchalenko 1974): I have not been able to obtain information on the damage suffered by the churches after the 2024 earthquake of Qotur (a city on the border between Türkiye and Iran, near Khoy) but I fear that it was significant. Anti-seismic consolidation works are urgent, at least through provisional works putting at safe some buildings or parts of unsafe buildings.

Those interventions will be possible only if it will be first possible to answer a question: Why preserve these buildings? Below I try to give some answers.

All these churches have a historical value that deserves to be preserved and enhanced in any case:

- they bear witness to the long-standing presence of important Armenian (and, more generally, Christian) communities;
- they are the destination of a "return" tourism by the Armenians of the diaspora who inhabited the region;

- they are buildings that deserve to find new uses, which make the conservation and maintenance works economically convenient;
- the villages where these buildings are located lack collective spaces that could constitute a point of reference for the community and the seat of some collective services. Churches no longer in use could be an important resource for these villages.

By this latter point of view the urban context where the churches are placed today has to be considered: some are located on the edge of the built-up area and near orchards and gardens. This can be an advantage from the point of view of environmental conditions. Others are in the urban area. These villages are never large: in any case a central position can favour a destination of use for collective services.

Others again are isolated in the countryside: if the church of Malhazan is a place of pilgrimage and close to an important communication road, difficult are the cases of ruins isolated and therefore also difficult to control.

5 New Uses

Finding new destinations of use looks like one of the indispensable conditions for the conservation of those buildings. What goals could we set to ensure that churches can be properly reused? Of course, not all uses should be allowed.

- In any case, maintaining the character of a building of worship and providing for forms of reuse that are congruent with the original nature of these buildings;
- respecting the architectural and decorative features and their historical-artistic and cultural values;
- planning a destination of use that be useful for the local population;
- enhancing the cultural potential of buildings (even those that are in ruins), primarily in memory of history and in support of the identity of the various villages, without, however, excluding their involvement in view of tourism (religious and cultural);
- also keeping the structures in a state of ruin or totally collapsed, in order to preserve their interest in ethnographic and archaeological research;
- involving the local population and that of the diaspora in the management and surveillance of the various sites. An environmental alarm system could protect churches from vandals.

6 Possible Forms of Reuse and Recovery

- 6.1. First evaluate whether some churches can be reopened for worship, at least on the occasion of some religious holidays or pilgrimages. Responsible: the Religious Authorities at various levels.
- 6.2. Buildings protected by law must be restored and, as far as possible, involved in cultural and 'roots tourism' religious and/or secular. Responsible: the National and Provincial Protection Bodies.
- 6.3. For all other buildings, which still maintain static conditions and roofs in good condition or easily recoverable: plan for the placement of small collective activities to support local communities (meeting rooms, small craft activities, child care, other cultural or social activities, in any case compatible with the religious origin of the buildings). Responsible: the Local communities or no-profit associations.
- 6.4. For ruins that cannot be recovered as buildings for use, but have nevertheless maintained a significant character in the urban landscape: set up small public spaces with trees, furnishings and places for rest and recreation (shade, small fountains, seats, etc.). Responsible: the inhabitants of the neighbourhood.
- 6.5. All areas of churches and their historic cemeteries must be subject to archaeological restrictions, promoting field research and recovery of any finds.
- 6.6. Rehearsing the observations at the beginning of this paper, in the hope that the political situation in the Middle East can be resolved in a peace process, Iranian Azerbaijan has great potential for cultural tourism:
 - presence of important cities as Urmia, Tabriz, Khoy and their accommodation and transport infrastructures;
 - proximity to the South Caucasus and Armenia in particular, areas of recent and important tourism development: UNESCO Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran, St. Thaddeus, St. Stepanos and the Chapel of Dzordzor are the destination of important pilgrimages. They are certainly a point of attraction from broad, both for religious and architectural aspects [figs 10a-b];
 - presence in the surroundings of Important Archaeological and Islamic monuments and sites of natural interest;
 - some Armenian buildings of the area offer great potentialities;
 - the church of St. Sarkis in Khoy could house (in the sacristies and/or in the side aisles) an exhibition structure and a small documentation / information centre to support

a knowledge of the region and serve as a starting point for visits [fig. 11].



Figure 10 S. Thaddaeus Monastery © Marouti A. and Dzor Dzor Chapel after restorations © Wiki Commons.
The chapel was dismantled and moved 600 meters following the construction of a dam

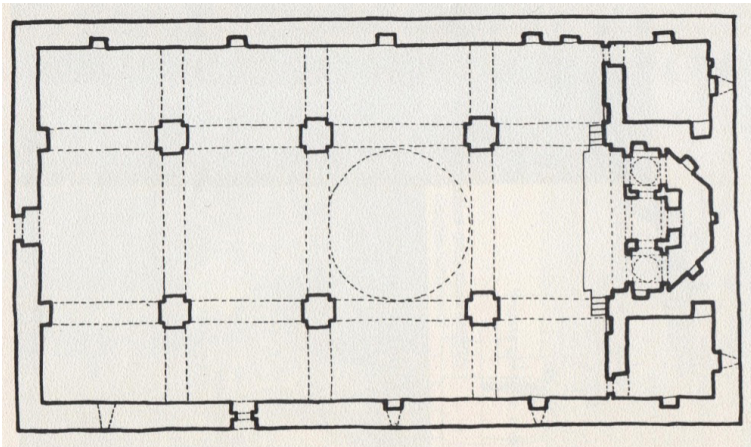


Figure 11 Khoys, S. Sargis: plan of a church which could be added to the UNESCO site. 1977.
© Alpagu Novello A.

In Haftvan in the church of S. Gevorg there are some interesting and rare frescoes recently rediscovered and restored [figs 12-13].



Figure 12 Haftwan S. Gevorg after recent restorations. 2018. © Boriani M.



Figure 13 Haftvan, S. Gevorg: mural paintings recently discovered and restored (details). 2018. © Boriani M.

Furthermore, in the enclosure of the church, there are the remains of the ruins of an Armenian theatre would also consent, the realisation of a lapidary museum, given the vast presence in the territory of tombstones and elements of decorations and inscriptions: many churches and cemeteries have been looted or vandalized in the past in all the Salmas region: the gravestones and sculptures of greater historical or ethnographic interest could be collected in the theatre building, rebuilt by recovering the surviving parts [fig. 14].



Figure 14 Haftvan, ruins of the theatre that might be rebuilt as Visitor Centre for the complex of Armenian churches in the Salmas territory © Boriani M.

7 A Modest Proposal

In my opinion it seems indispensable that specific agreements should be drawn up involving the Armenian Diaspora abroad, the Iranian Armenians, the Government of Armenia, the Iranian National and Regional Governments, ICHTO, National and International Universities and the local population for a strategic plan to safeguard and enhance this heritage, in which the rights and duties of the various parties are made clear.

I hope this paper will be a first opportunity to start a fruitful discussion on these issues as well as a concrete program of protection and conservation of this important Historical and Cultural Heritage.

Too optimistic? I realize that the current situation is not favourable.

Yet I think we still have a responsibility to look ahead and prepare the ground for when the time comes, as we said. It shouldn't be difficult to find intellectual resources, not only economic, to begin setting up a feasibility study that verifies what I have illustrated on this occasion. I am ready to cooperate in this work.

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On Some Murals of St. George (St. Gevorg) Church of Salmast in Iran and the Armenian Art

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Abstract There are numerous works of Armenian art created during centuries in Armenia and in the territories inhabited by Armenians, that were never put in scholarly circulation and stayed unknown to experts. As Armenia many times became the battlefield between different powers and was occupied by them, numerous examples of its architecture and sculpture were damaged or destroyed, illustrated manuscripts and objects of applied arts were looted and disappeared. Also, numerous wall paintings were lost forever or come down to us in fragments as numerous churches during foreign yokes were destroyed and demolished by invaders. Many examples of architecture, sculpture, khachkars and tombs were abandoned and forgotten when the Armenians left the territories in the countries where they have once established their communities.

Keywords Iran. Salmast. St. George church. Haftvan. Wall paintings. Adam and Eve. St. George and Dragon. Coronation of Virgin Mary and child. St. Sargis and Martiros. Last Judgement.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 General Remarks Concerning the Interior Decoration of Armenian Sanctuaries and the Study of St. George Church. – 2.1 Wall Paintings of Column 1. – 2.2 Wall Paintings of Column 2. – 2.3 Wall Paintings of Column 3. – 2.4 Wall Paintings of Column 4. – 2.5 Wall Paintings of the Right Wall. – 3 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

The examples of the Armenian painting that have come down to us are found mainly in illustrated manuscripts preserved in the Matenadaran collection of Yerevan and also in many libraries and museums of various countries.

Wall paintings, in comparison with miniatures, are less known and are not enough studied. The purpose of this article is to present some general observations on the wall decoration of the Armenian St. George church [fig. 1] in the village of Haftvan, a part of Salmast County, in central Salmast (located north of Urmia and south of Khoy) in the West Azerbaijan Province of Iran. This area was for many centuries inhabited also by Armenians (Shahinian 2021, 351-72, 368; Karapetyan 2019; Avedian 2021, 142). It is necessary to note that in Armenia and its neighboring territories, including Iran and also Salmast region, many churches were devoted to St. George (Avedian 2021, 132-51).



Figure 1 Iran, Salmast, village Haftvan, St. George Church, West façade, ca. 17th c. @ SHA (Salmast Heritage Association) Archive

The exploration of the murals of the church in Haftvan is already started by various scholars but its present state is not satisfactory.

The architecture of St. George church was mainly studied by Iranian architects and restorators, but the iconography and style of the mural fragments need thorough examination. In my paper, I

discuss the wall paintings of St. George church from the point of view of the connections and artistic traditions inherited from the Armenian art of the previous centuries. This article aims to contribute to the discovery and demonstration of the possible models used by painters and study of the compositions in comparison with other surviving Armenian murals of the same epoch.

2 General Remarks Concerning the Interior Decoration of Armenian Sanctuaries and the Study of St. George Church

Certain written sources and remnants of murals of the sixth and seventh centuries AD testify about the style and iconographic program which was typical for art of the Armenian painters who decorated sanctuaries (Der Nersessian 1973). During the Arab domination of Armenia in the seventh-ninth centuries AD this artistic process was interrupted. In the tenth and later centuries, the Armenian artists with some intervals continued the tradition of painting the walls of their cathedrals (Der Nersessian 1965).

There are certain murals which partly or completely survived in the buildings erected in Iran in the late medieval period. The decoration of St. George church in the village of Haftvan is exceptional among such artworks as it was already cleaned and restored (Bakhshai, Khan Mohammadi 2015).

Certain parts of the decoration of St. George church are now visible in that church which was built in the thirteenth century AD. It was rebuilt in 1649 (Shahinian 2021, fn. 3, 368) or 1652 (Shoja Del 2012) and also after the Salmast earthquake in 1930.

I do not know if the all the walls of the church were frescoed as the wall paintings of the church did not survive completely. That is why it is not possible now to have the complete comprehension concerning the all-iconographic program of decoration. Unfortunately, there was no chance for me to visit this church and explore its paintings. That's why I am very grateful to my old friend, architect Marco Brambilla, who supplied me with photographic and literal information concerning St. George church of Haftvan.

This church was first examined in 1969 by German scholar W. Kleiss (Kleiss 1969, 7-119). Later, between 1977 and 1978, an Italian team from the Politecnico di Milano with A. Alpago-Novello also visited and studied the church (Alpago Novello 1977; 1988). The Armenian researcher A. Hovian included this church in his studies¹

¹ Hovian 2003; Shoja Del 2012; Malekzadeh Dilmaghani, Bakhshai, Khan Mohammadi 2015, 223-35; 2018, 138-53.

and also examined this historic site. The wall painting conservation and restoration project at St. George's Church was conducted by the West Azerbaijan Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization over two months in August and September 2014. During two months of continuous activity, the deteriorated dome windows were replaced with more durable ones. Also, the church bell tower, which had become structurally weak, was reinforced. Beside that, hidden wall paintings on two eastern columns near the altar were uncovered.

These columns, with a rectangular cube shape and a height of about five and a half meters, along with the interior surfaces of the church walls, had been covered in the past with plaster, which was poured on parts of the columns and behind the plaster there are remains of frescoes. During this process, layers of plaster covering the columns were delicately and carefully removed, revealing eight distinct murals featuring human figures, animals, plants, and geometric patterns. In the second phase of the project, which was implemented in 2018, more parts of these frescoes were revealed. Due to the work of Iranian experts, the frescoes obtained in this study phase can be divided into three parts: A) Frescoes on the body of the church columns; B) Frescoes on the southern wall of the church; C) Paintings on the northern wall of the church columns. Two of the four main rectangular columns – located on the eastern side, near the altar – preserved most of those fragments.

The remnants of murals here represent Adam and Eve, St. George and the Dragon, Virgin Mary and the child and angels who keep the crown above her head, St. Sargis and Martiros, weighting the souls (Last Judgement detail) as well as floral and geometric patterns with a central diamond motif.

2.1 Wall Paintings of Column 1

The representation of Adam and Eve is on the upper section of the southern side of Column 1 [fig. 2] and they are portrayed from both sides of the brownish-orange tree, and have loincloths, Eve has an apple in her hand, they are reaching out their hands to each other, touching the tree, the branches of which are spread above their heads. Adam's face is better preserved than Eve's. The snake is also depicted. The slime patterns have been drawn around them, but unfortunately, due to extensive damage, only a small part of the plant patterns remain, and for this reason, it is not possible to identify the type of patterns. The frame's edge is also decorated with floral and red flowers and green leaves around them are stylized with floral and arabesque motifs. Below the two sides of the tree are sycamore-like trees, which are also present in the lower corners of the composition.



Figure 2 Iran, Salmast, village Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of Adam and Eva, portrayed on the southern side of Column 1, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

This subject is known already from the decoration of sculptures and wall paintings of the Holy Cross church on the Aghtamar island (now in Turkey) dated by 915-921 AD (Der Nersessian 1965, 19, 37, 43, figs 41, 47, 58). Among the oldest examples of this theme, one should mention the illustrations of the Bible of 1318 AD (Matenadaran, Ms. 206), created by Toros Taronatsi for Esayi Nchetsi, who was the rector of Gladzor university (Avetisyan 1971, 92, fig. 22; Der Nersessian 1977, 220-3, ill. 169). The same subject was registered also in the examples of later centuries, especially in the interior decoration of seventeenth-eighteenth centuries sanctuaries and also in manuscript illumination and textiles of earliest centuries or that period² (as in the mural of Salmast, Adam and Eve are portrayed with loincloths on the curtains made in India or Iran in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries; Armenian Museum of America). It is noteworthy that Adam and Eve are portrayed with loincloths in the same composition on the walls of St. Grigor church of Znaberd or Aznaberd village of Naxiĵevan, chronologically and geographically close to fresco in Salmast (Ayvazyan 1981, 146, ill. 102; Ayvazyan 1998, 67, 74, 75, fig. 44).

St. Grigor church of Naxiĵevan was rebuilt in the second half of the seventeenth century and, unfortunately, this church was demolished by the Azeris in the twentieth century. The research of this church and frescoes and their publication were done by A. Ayvazian in spite of many difficulties and restrictions made by the Azeri administration. In June-August of 1867 these wall paintings were restored and new compositions were added on the walls of church by invited painter who is supposed to be the priest Hakob Ter-Abrahamian from Astapat who was active during that period.

The comparison with other Armenian paintings showing Adam and Eve allows to conclude that the portrayal of Salmast fresco has slight differences from them.

On the lower section of the southern side of Column 1 of St. George's Church, the painting has been largely destroyed. However, based on the fragments that remain, on the margins also within a rectangular frame a rhombus in the center is represented [fig. 3], in the milieu of blue sprouts with red flowers. Inside of the rhombus, large central lozenge-shaped medallion and floral and arabesque motifs around the edges are shown.

² Hakobyan 1976; Narkiss 1979, 95-6, figs 142, 143; Thierry, Donabedian 1987, ill. 512; Kevorkian-Achdjian 1991, 143, ill. 140; Nersessian 2001, 219-20, fig. 152; and on the curtain of 1710 in London, Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 3 Iran, Salmast, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of Adam and Eva, below them a rhombus, portrayed on the southern side of Column 1, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

The damaged painting located on the upper section of the western facet of Column 1 is a composition showing Mary, portrayed with the child in her arms [fig. 4]. Mary seems sitting on a chair made of marble, the orange dress covering her legs can be seen under the blue mantel. The clothes of the child are represented in the same way and colors. The latter is portrayed with a halo. To the left of the Virgin one can see a branch of the rose in a vase, and below which is another branch of the rose.



Figure 4 Iran, Salmast, village Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of Mary and child, portrayed on the western facet of Column 1, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

The two angels keep the crown above Virgin's head. It is necessary to note that Mary's Crowning is not mentioned in the Bible. It is originated from an apocryphal story attributed to Meliton, Bishop of Sardis, which was popularized in the sixth century by Gregory of Tours, and in the thirteenth century by Jacques de Voragine in the Golden Legend (Réau 1957, 621). The two angels crowning Mary appear in a miniature of the German bishop Bernward's Gospel of 1015 (Hildesheim, Treasury of

cathedral, cod. 18) (van OS 1970, 671-2).³ It is one of the oldest known examples of such composition. The iconography of the Armenian wall painting is different from the versions of this subject when Mary is crowned by Christ as the Queen of Heaven or Christ and God the Father are included (van OS 1970, 673-5).

The wall painting in Salmast is related to those artifacts which show the Virgin, being crowned by one or two angels and appear in both Eastern and Western art. Among the oldest western examples is the painting of the Cologne Museum, made around 1460 by an anonymous master known as the Master of the Glorification of the Virgin (active in Cologne, second half of the fifteenth century).⁴ The Angels here are represented between God the Father and the dove of the Holy Spirit while, above her, Christ is symbolized by the Lamb pouring his blood into a chalice (Réau 1957, 621).

The Armenian artefacts that have come down to us are demonstrating the same subject, showing that their authors used different versions of the iconography of the Virgin crowned by two angels. This subject was very popular, and many preserved artworks testify about that.⁵ Noteworthy examples can be found in the silver covers of Armenian manuscripts and printed books, as well as in certain icons from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The similar but not same composition is visible on the painting of Hovnatan Hovnatanian (1730-1801) in the residence of Catholics of all Armenians (Etchmiadzin). The same iconography is shown also on a curtain of 1781 made in Tokat (Etchmiadzin, Treasury) and on a curtain of 1805 and mitre of the eighteenth century from the same collection. In this context, one should remember also the image on a textile of the eighteenth century from New Julfa in Grassi Museum (Germany). The subject was very popular among the painters of several Armenian icons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, preserved in Armenian churches of Romania, and in certain cases, it is called Mother of God, Queen of Heaven.

The comparison with the Armenian examples shows that the painting of Virgin Mary, child and angels of Salmast do not completely repeat the numerous presentations of the same subject.

It is well known that the composition with two angels keeping the crown above Virgin's head was very popular especially among

³ The miniature can be viewed at the following link: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zgothic/miniatur/1001-050/3other/02_1003.html.

⁴ Glorification of Mary, ca. 1470. Wallraf-Richartz Museum. Cologne. Germany - Album alb3687265. The work can be viewed at the following link: <https://www.album-online.com/detail/en/NTFiMDBjMA/master-glorification-virgin-active-cologne-second-half-15th-century-mary-alb3687265>.

⁵ Goltz 2000, 77; Karapetyan 2023, 252; Treasures of Etchmiadzin 1984; Armenian Treasures in Romania 2020, 109, 113, 115-16, 119-20, 121, 128-9.

German and Netherlandish painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and later on in the milieu of Italian and other western European artists. Especially remarkable are the works of German painters Stefan Lochner, Hans Memling, Albrecht Dürer and Albrecht Altdorfer who created different iconographical versions of this subject. No doubt that the Armenian artists became familiar with these iconographical compositions through print culture, in other words, from the Western printed book's illustrations. These books were appearing in Eastern European and even far Eastern countries through merchants and catholic missionaries transferring engravings of Western artists. It is noteworthy that Albrecht Dürer created three engravings on this subject around 1504 AD, 1513 AD and 1518 AD which do not repeat each other.

It is interesting to mention that, among many Armenian paintings illustrating the same theme, there is only one icon which near Virgin Mary, child and angels represents the branch of the rose in a vase from their both sides. It is a work of an unknown painter and dated by 1752 and is in private collection (Avetisyan 2015, 178, ill. 74).

In the Salmast painting a strip filled with floral ornament separates this scene from the lower composition, which features a rhombus in the center, in the milieu of blue sprouts with red flowers. The lower composition and that of Virgin Mary with child and angels are both framed with bands showing curling sprouts with red and yellow flowers. Such framing and composition of a rhombus with flowers appears also below the survived scenes on other columns. The painting on the lower section of the western side of Column 1, within a frame, is similar to the floral composition already mentioned above.

2.2 Wall Paintings of Column 2

In the next partly surviving painting on the upper section of the western facet of Column 2, close to the doorway, a horseman is visible [fig. 5]. He has a red mantle, green shirt and pants. He is nimbed, which indicates that here we are dealing with a saint. His horse is grey too. He carries lance and is stabbing the winged Dragon with it. Before him are shown two cypress trees.

The photographic documentation under my disposal shows that the interior of St. George church of Salmast once was decorated with several cavalier saints and some of them are in better shape so it is possible to identify them.



Figure 5 Iran, Salmast, village Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of St. Theodore killing the dragon? portrayed on the western facet of Column 2, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

Generally speaking, the warrior horseman saints are portrayed in fourteenth-seventeenth centuries Armenian book illumination especially by the miniaturists of the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries who worked in Syunik. They are portrayed by the miniaturists of the fourteenth century, for instance by Toros Taronaci (in the Gospel of 1337, Matenadaran, Ms. No. 212). One should remember also those masters, whose activity in later periods was connected with the scriptorium of the Tat'ev monastery, for instance, in a Gospel of the fourteenth century written and probably illustrated by Grigor (Matenadaran, Ms. 6305; Mirzoyan 1987, ill. 50-2; Korkhmazian, Hakopian, Drampian 1984, 3). This theme is known from many Armenian artefacts; for instance, it appears on the silver dish of 1641 of Etchmiadzin Museum (Inv.No. 6131) (Platt 1995, S.321, Abb. 218), enamel medallion of the crown of Gregory the Chainbearer made in 1747 in Constantinople (Narkiss 1979, 143, 158, fig. 186), and was popular among many painters, as the illustrators of Armenian icons of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries in Romania, and also on Armenian curtains of 1663 of Suceava (Romania), of 1756 and of 1799 made in Tokat (Etchmiadzin, Treasury), also the others of seventeenth-nineteenth centuries in Romania, again made in Tokat, in Armenia and elsewhere (Armenian Treasures in Romania 2020, 170, 172; Treasures of Etchmiadzin 1984). This composition appears in wall paintings and icons of the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries,

also with other scenes from the life of Christ, which demonstrates the interest towards this iconography. Three warrior saints are visible also on the above-mentioned curtain made in India or Iran in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries (Armenian Museum of America).

It seems to me that the above-mentioned horseman is St. Theodore killing the dragon. The military saint is considered "as 'defender of the faith,' and represents the triumph of good over evil in a Christian universe" (Marchese, Breu 2015, 288). St. Theodore very often is shown in Armenian art. The earliest known example of the portrayal of this saint in Armenian art appears among the reliefs of the wooden door of 1134 of Arakelots (St. Apostles) monastery in Mush. That monastery was demolished by the Turks. The door is preserved in the State Museum of History in Yerevan (Dymydyuke 2019). This saint is portrayed also in Kütahya tiles of 1719 in Armenian Cathedral of Jerusalem (Narkiss 1979, 130-1, 157, fig. 173).

The painting on the lower section of the western side of Column 2, within a frame is similar to the floral composition of the Column 1 already mentioned above.

The remnants of the painting representing two nimbed human heads and the other reminding a masque, located on the upper section of the northern side of Column 2, do not give a chance to identify the subject. The partly damaged painting on the lower section of the northern side of Column 2, within a frame, is similar to the floral composition of the Column 1 already mentioned above.

2.3 Wall Paintings of Column 3

The fragments of the murals on the west facet of Column 3 do not give a chance to identify the represented subject. The framed composition of a rhombus with flowers below these fragments is better preserved.

2.4 Wall Paintings of Column 4

On the Column 4 a horseman is portrayed [fig. 6] whose name is not written. He has a red mantle, grey shirt, blue pants and brown shoes. He is not nimbed which indicates that here we are not dealing with a saint, but probable with the donor of church. His horse is grey too. The painting on the lower section of the Column 4, within a frame is similar to the floral composition of Column 1 already mentioned above.



Figure 6 Iran, Salmast, village Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of unknown Horseman, portrayed on the Column 4, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

2.5 Wall Paintings of the Right Wall

It is no doubt that on the right wall of the church, not far from the doorway of the church, we are dealing with the representation of St. George shown as a horseman stabbing the Dragon with a long spear [figs 7, 8]. The identification of this image is possible as above it is written “St. Gevorg”.



Figure 7 Iran, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of St. George and the dragon, St. Sargis and Martiros, portrayed on the right wall, ca. seventeenth c. © SHA Archive

It is noteworthy that in the calendar of the Armenian church and in the folkloric memory of Armenians there is a group of the martyriized warrior saints evolving five armed horsemen who has byzantine origin. Among them, St. Sargis is considered the most powerful and fastest guard of Armenians. The cult of St. George is traditional for all Christian people (Devrikyan 2010). Certain typological features of St. Sargis and St. George are common also for St. Theodore, St. Mercurius and St. Minas (Devrikyan 2010). The depictions of St. George killing the dragon with his spear are represented in many examples of Armenian and Georgian art (Aleksidze, Gedevanishvili 2025). This is the usual form of his images and often confused with the portrayal of St. Theodore (Marchese, Breu 2015, 199, 290, fig. 67).

St. George is depicted in Salmast church at the left side of the window which was walled up in the past. St. George in this fresco is nimbed, has a white tunic, blue shirt and blue pants, red mantle and yellow shoes. He has no shield as in some other Armenian murals, as for instance in the fresco of the Holy Mother of God in the Armenian church of Famagusta of the early fourteenth century (Kouymjian 2016, 142, fig. 12.9). In the Salmast painting St. George's brown horse tramples the Dragon who is light brown. To the left and to the right of the rider one can see the trees with red flowers.



Figure 8 Iran, Salmast, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of St. George and the dragon, St. Mercurius, portrayed on the right wall, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

There are numerous Armenian monasteries, churches, chapels, fortresses, villages, mountains and also cross-stones (*xač'k'ars*) which are named after St. George (Petrosyan 2002).

The representation of St. George and the Dragon is a subject which is already known among the wall paintings of the seventh-century AD church of Karmravor or Holy Mother in Ashtarak, in decorations of the Talin cathedral, in the sculptures of the above-mentioned Holy Cross church on Aghtamar island (Der Nersessian 1965, 19, fig. 49),

on pewter flasks of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries for storing the raki or Holy Chrism or Muron and on Kütahiya ceramic bowls of same period (K'iwrtean 1957, 110-29, figs 1, 2, 3, 10; Žamkoč'yan, Hakobyan 2001, 322-6; Vardanyan 2012, 153, fig. 53).

The iconography of the composition showing St. George in Salmast church allows me to assume that also chronologically and geographically it is close to the well-preserved wall painting illustrating the same subject in the church St. Hovhannes in Melri city dated to the seventeenth century (Avetisyan 2019; 2020).

Meanwhile the portrayal of St. George and Dragon of Salmast has slight differences from the known compositions of the same subject. As I have mentioned above, this image is depicted in St. George Church at the left side of the window which was walled up in the past. To the right of that closed window and on the same level as St. George and the Dragon is the better-preserved representation of St. Sargis and his son Martiros on the horse. There is no inscription accompanying this fresco.



Figure 9 Iran, Salmast, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of Iulianus Apostata falling from the horse, portrayed on the right wall, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

Below the image of St. George, we see the preserved part of the image of the equestrian saint St. Mercury, and to the right of him, the horse, from which only the legs of Julian the Apostate falling from it remain [figs 7-9]. The latter and military saint can be identified by

the Armenian inscriptions shown above them. Here the part of the figure of the horse is better preserved.

Coming back to the mural of St. Sargis and his son Martiros [figs 7, 10], one can see that it has come to us in better shape. St. Sargis, as a warrior who was also martyred, is, as was mentioned above, one of the most respected saints of the Armenian church (Archbishop Ashjian 2002) and also occupies an important place in the Armenian folkloric literature (Harut'yunyan 2002). There are numerous Armenian monasteries, churches, chapels, fortresses, villages, mountains (Sargsyan 2002) and also cross-stones (*xač'k'ars*) which are named after St. Sargis (Petrosyan 2002).



Figure 10 Iran, Salmast, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of St. Sargis and Martiros, portrayed on the right wall, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

The earliest known examples of this subject are shown in the wall paintings of the above-mentioned seventh-century church of Karmravor or Holy Mother in Ashtarak and those of St. Stephen church in Lmbat (seventh century) and the sculptures of the above-mentioned Holy Cross church on the Aghtamar island (Der Nersessian 1965, 19, fig. 49).

The iconography of this composition is very well known in Armenian medieval art of the later period also and is registered in medieval sculptures and miniatures (Korkhmazian 2002), in textiles, silverwork, Kütahiya ceramic bowls, and altar curtains of the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries (Treasures of Etchmiadzin 1984; Žamkoč'yan, Hakobyan 2002), as well as f.i. in Armenian churches of

Romania (Armenian Treasures in Romania 2020, 171, 176, 177). St. Sargis is nimbed, has a military costume, blue pants, red mantle and brown shoes. His son wears a not-well-visible blue dress. St. Sargis has a mace in his hand and sword attached to his belt. Martiros also is in military costume and carries a lance. The scene of the church in Salmast is chronologically and geographically close to the image of St. George on the wall painting of the already-mentioned St. Grigor church of Znaberd or Aznaberd village (Ayvazyan 1981, 115-16, ill. 104). These features are known from the representation of the same subject in that church so that this fresco deserves special attention (Ayvazyan 1981, 115-16, ill. 106). It is interesting to note in these two murals that the buckle of the belt connecting the saddle to the horse's belly has the same form.

The portrayal of St. Sargis of Salmast demonstrates slight differences in comparison to numerous compositions of the same subject but, as one can see, it is close to the mural of St. Grigor church of Znaberd or Aznaberd.

The composition below St. Sargis and Martiros is not completely survived. Only a fragment of an image of the angel and small black devil's figure and the cap of the other devil and two cypress trees and the bush with red roses are observed [fig. 9] which do let to identify the subject of the scene.

On the upper part of the left side of the window of the southern wall is represented another warrior saint stabbing some creature with a long spear [fig. 11]. This can be St. Minas who is killing the wolf according to one of the Armenian folkloric prayers (Devrikyan 2010). The head of his horse and the upper part of the horseman is not preserved and the bad quality of the photos of this composition which are at my disposal do not give a chance to comprehend the colors of the mural. The identification of this saint is corresponding to the images St. Theodore, St. George and St. Sargis who are shown in the church of Salmast.

On one of the walls of Salmast church the scene of the Weighting of souls is preserved, which is a fragment of the image of Last Judgement. The hell in mural is portrayed with black color. Here in the darkness, we see the river of fire that flows down to hell. In the stream of the infernal fire the damned cannot be seen very clearly. In the middle of the composition a big angel [fig. 12], with red wings and red shirt and pants and long, black shoes is keeping the balance and weighting the souls of the sinners while small black devils are helping him. Another much smaller angel with a nimbus next to him is conversing with a sinner.

On the left side of the scene a heavenly garden with heavenly trees with fruits symbolizes Eden. Here in the green space of heaven, the elects are represented. Next to this area, inside of the medallions are portrayed six apostles and names of some of them are written

and preserved. The image of Christ in the center is not completely preserved [fig. 13]. Same is true for images of the Virgin and John the Baptist, angels and the other six apostles in medallions on the right side of composition [fig. 14].



Figure 11 Iran, Salmast, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of St. Minas stabbing the wolf, portrayed on of the left side of the window of southern wall ca. seventeenth c., @ SHA Archive



Figure 12 Iran, Salmast, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of Angel and devils (the Last Judgement), portrayed on the northern wall, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

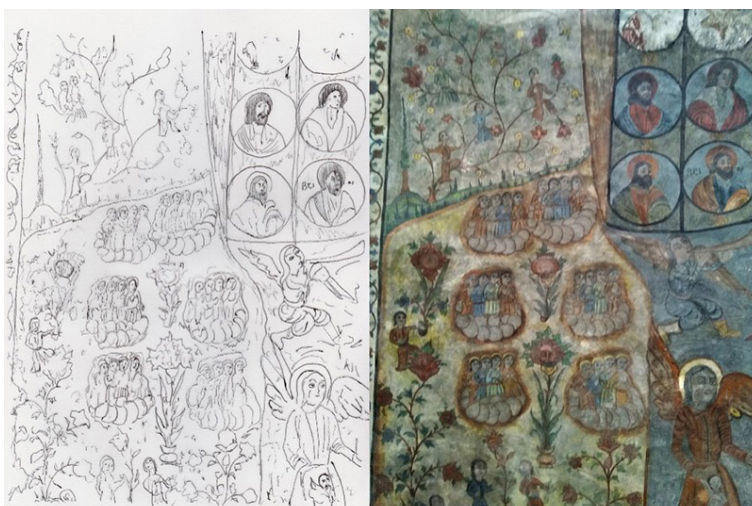


Figure 13 Iran, Salmast, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of Eden and the apostles (the Last Judgement), portrayed on the northern wall, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive



Figure 14 Iran, Salmast, Haftvan, St. George Church, fresco of The Last Judgement, portrayed on the northern wall, ca. seventeenth c. @ SHA Archive

The theme of Last Judgement in Armenian art first appears in the fragments of the frescoes of St. Stephen church of Lmbat (seventh century) (Chookaszian 2021), Holy Cross Church of Aghtamar island (Der Nersessian 1965), and of Saints Peter and Paul church of Tat'ev monastery (930 AD) (Der Nersessian 1977, fig. 63, 64) and in the sculptural decorations of the Horomos Monastery forechurch (1038 AD) near Ani (Chookaszian 2021; Vardanyan 2015, 236, 255-62, 259, figs IV-1, IV-7, IV-8, IV-12, IV-15), on one of the carved plugs of the polygonal drum and among the reliefs of Bleno Noravank in Syunik of eleventh century AD (Chookaszian 2021).

The Weighting of souls as iconographical fragment in Armenian Last Judgements is very well known from the Armenian miniatures of the manuscripts of the fourteenth century created in scriptoriums of the Vaspurakan school and in other centers of the fifteenth-seventeenth centuries (Hakopian 1978, ill. 85, 87). It appears in the mural of the above-mentioned church of St. Hovhannes in Melri which is chronologically close to the Salmast frescos. Both compositions reveal other similar details too (the images of black devils etc.).

3 Conclusion

The study of the frescoes of St. George church in Salmast is giving additional information concerning the history of Armenian medieval wall painting and especially those which survived from seventeenth century. This paper demonstrates that the iconography of the compositions indicates the similarity with the wall paintings of certain churches erected in Naxiĵevan (destroyed by Azeris) and

Mełri created during same epoch and also with miniatures, icons, sculptures and altar curtains. It is quite possible that the painters who created the murals of Salmast were connected with the authors of compared frescoes. The study of the frescoes of St. George church and their comparison with the works of other painters of the same period demonstrates the same taste and same aesthetic orientations. The small geographical distance between Salmast, Naxiġevan and Mełri was apparently giving many chances to Armenian painters for communication and joint work. Those artists were familiar with the traditions of Armenian art and also with the works of Western arts and were following them. The murals of Salmast reveal new facts concerning Armenian and Western cross-cultural traditions and influence of print culture on those wall paintings. The study of the frescoes of St. George church is giving additional information concerning the history of those connections. It was impossible to represent in this paper all the research on peculiarities of these murals. The present study is a short, condensed communication and it may stimulate the research of Salmast frescoes by other scholars. Unfortunately, the fragments of the rest of the decoration are not enough to identify the subjects of the scenes. My research allows to conclude that St. Mercurius and other warrior saints such as St. Theodore and St. Minas were also represented in the church of Salmast. When the gypsum layers covering the other paintings will be removed it will be possible to reveal the remnants of the hidden frescoes. Hopefully the art historians of next generations will discover more information about the decoration of St. George church in Salmast.

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Silent Sentinels Unveiling the Stories of Armenian Tombstones in Iran

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Abstract Armenian tombstones across Iran act as ‘silent sentinels’ reflecting the long history and cultural continuity of Armenian communities. This study examines their significance through historical and descriptive analysis, using photographic data from Salmast Heritage Association expeditions, the RAA archive, Google Maps, and scholarly sources. It highlights regional typologies – horizontal blocks, slabs, vertical and ram-shaped forms – distinct from traditional Khachkars. Motifs reveal religious symbols, gender roles, and social identity. The research also addresses modern shifts and preservation challenges, emphasizing these monuments as key expressions of Armenian identity and resilience.

Keywords Rectangular Block Tombstones. Slab Tombstones. Combined Tombstones. Tombstone Symbols. Arevakhach. Tree of Life. Cross. Ram. Preservation Challenges.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Methodology. – 3 Historical Context. – 4 Evolution of Armenian Tombstones: From Prehistory to Khachkars. – 5 General Classification of Armenian Tombstones in Iran. – 6 Typology of Armenian Tombstone Forms in Northwestern Iran. – 7 Ram-shaped Tombstones: A Caucasus Tradition. – 8 Motifs and Symbols on Armenian Tombstones in Iran. – 9 Christian Burial Practices Beyond the Armenian Community. – 10 The Shift to Urban Cemeteries in the Twentieth Century. – 11 Challenges and preservation. – 12 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

This scholarly exploration, delves into the rich cultural and historical significance of Armenian funerary monuments within Iran, recognizing the Armenian presence as a historical continuum stretching from antiquity to the present day. Throughout this extensive period, Armenian settlement patterns evolved significantly: northwestern Iran, historically intertwined with or part of Greater Armenia, hosted Armenian communities from much earlier times, while central regions, notably Isfahan and its New Julfa district, gained particular prominence during the Safavid period following the forced relocation of Armenians by Shah Abbas I. Established over centuries across these distinct regions, Armenian cemeteries house tombstones that serve as compelling testaments to an enduring legacy and vital artifacts narrating the intricate story of this community, both in its ancient heartlands and areas of later, often involuntary, settlement. These monuments are especially crucial as tangible evidence where Armenian populations have dwindled or vanished. With unique architectural styles (categorized primarily as horizontal, vertical, and combined) and intricate decorative motifs reflecting a blend of local customs and broader Iranian, Islamic, and Central Asian influences, these tombstones stand as silent witnesses to a deep intertwining of Armenian and Persian cultures, shaped by fluctuating socio-political dynamics and reflecting the beliefs and values of the deceased and their community. This paper aims to unveil the stories etched in stone by examining the historical context, multifaceted symbolism, regional variations, stylistic evolution, and profound cultural significance of these memorials, thereby offering a deeper understanding of Armenian heritage, identity, resilience, and cultural continuity within the diverse landscape of Iran, while also acknowledging the significant preservation challenges these invaluable monuments face in the contemporary era.

2 Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and historical methodology, relying significantly on the analysis of photographic documentation gathered from diverse sources to investigate Armenian tombstones across different regions of Iran. For the northwestern region, particularly Salmas, primary visual data was obtained through two main channels. Firstly, extensive photographic materials were sourced from four expeditions conducted by the Salmast Heritage Association (SHA): two in June and July 2017, one in October 2017, and another in October 2018. The latter two expeditions were notably led by Professor Maurizio Boriani (Politecnico di Milano), and the fourth expedition

incorporated specialized aerial imaging, utilizing drones to capture high-resolution footage and photographs of Armenian monuments, villages, and cemeteries, contributing thousands of images that were subsequently categorized and archived. Secondly, this research utilized the photographic archive compiled by Samvel Karapetian and the Research on Armenian Architecture (RAA), specifically drawing upon their dedicated monograph featuring a comprehensive photographic survey of the Salmas region (Karapetian 2019). Visual documentation for Armenian cemeteries in Central Iran, including Tehran and Isfahan, was primarily sourced from publicly available photographs uploaded by users to Google Maps. These extensive photographic collections were supplemented and contextualized by information drawn from relevant published scholarly books and articles, as detailed in the bibliography. The methodology involved the comparative analysis of tombstone forms, motifs, and inscriptions captured in these visual sources, interpreted within the historical and cultural frameworks provided by the secondary literature.

3 Historical Context

The Armenian presence on the Iranian plateau has deep roots, dating back to times predating the formal establishment of Greater Armenia, with historical accounts and inscriptions documenting Armenians as inhabitants across various Persian empires, including the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanian dynasties. This enduring presence over millennia signifies a deeply rooted history unfolding through numerous political transformations. Prior to the third century AD, Iranian influence on Armenian culture was substantial, often marked by intermarriages among nobility and shared religious practices. However, significant shifts occurred with Armenia's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century and the subsequent Arab conquests, which gradually distanced Armenian communities from some aspects of Iranian socio-religious life (Hovannisian 2022).

The primary areas of Armenian settlement in Iran can be broadly categorized into two main regions, each with distinct historical trajectories. The northwest of Iran, encompassing areas historically part of Greater Armenia (including regions like Nor Shirakan, Vaspurakan, and Paytakaran within Iranian Azerbaijan), boasts ancient roots and a continuous Armenian presence in cities such as Tabriz, Khoy, Urmia, Salmas, Maku, Ardabil, and Maragheh (Bournoutian 2002). Events like the Seljuk and Mongol invasions in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries spurred further Armenian migration into this northwestern area (Russell 2013), suggesting its tombstones may hold keys to understanding the earliest Armenian funerary traditions within Iran.

The second major area includes the Caspian, central, and southern regions of Iran. These settlements largely emerged later, gaining significant prominence from the Safavid era in the early seventeenth century onwards. This shift was driven primarily by the large-scale forced relocation of Armenians from the Ottoman borderlands under Shah Abbas I, who moved many to central Iran, particularly establishing the New Julfa quarter adjacent to Isfahan (Hovannisian 2022; Bournoutian 2002). This policy, while coercive, led to the flourishing of communities like New Julfa, which played a vital role in trade, connecting Iran with European and Asian markets, and fostered a unique cultural synthesis within the Persian context (Aslanian 2011). Other Armenian settlements subsequently developed in cities like Tehran, Arak, and Shiraz, and regions such as Gilan and Mazandaran.

The political landscape continued to evolve, significantly impacting Armenian communities and their expressions of identity. The Pahlavi era (1921-78), marked by efforts towards national unity and westernization, influenced the architectural expression of memorial tombs, including those of Armenians, often resulting in a fusion of personal artistic approaches with broader national and global design trends (Yaghoubian 2014). By the twentieth century, Iran had become a crucial center for Armenian life in the Middle East, with a substantial population (~100,000 by the late nineteenth century) (Bournoutian 2002). Armenians, particularly those in Iranian Azerbaijan due to their proximity to Transcaucasia, became involved in regional political activities and played an integral role in broader Iranian socio-political events like the Constitutional Revolution (Bournoutian 2002).

However, recent centuries have witnessed a significant decline in Iran's Armenian population due to emigration (Iskandaryan 2019). Understanding these demographic shifts, alongside the long history of settlement, cultural synthesis, political influence, and regional distinctions - from the ancient communities of the northwest to the Safavid-era foundations in central Iran and the transformations of the twentieth century - provides the crucial context for interpreting the Armenian tombstones scattered across Iran. These silent sentinels narrate the rich, complex, and evolving history of their community within a land of diverse influences.

4 Evolution of Armenian Tombstones: From Prehistory to Khachkars

To understand the forms and significance of Armenian tombstones, including those found in Iran, it is helpful to briefly trace the long evolution of memorial stone traditions within the Armenian Highlands. The practice dates back to deep antiquity, with early precursors potentially seen in megalithic standing stone arrangements like Carahunge. More distinctively Armenian are the monumental basalt stelae known as *Vishapakars* (dragon stones), often associated with water sources and bearing unique, pre-Christian carvings (Petrosyan 2015).

Later, during the Iron Age, particularly within the Kingdom of Urartu (ninth-sixth centuries BCE) which encompassed parts of the Armenian Highlands, inscribed stelae served various commemorative and declarative purposes. These Urartian stelae represent a continuation of monumental stone carving traditions in the region (Zimansky 1985) [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Unknown author, Zorats Karer; Vishap stone (Metsamor); Urtian stela (Zvartnots). n.d. Stone monuments. Armenia. Wikipedia, public domain

With Armenia's adoption of Christianity as its state religion in the early fourth century CE, a profound transformation in memorial art began, although it occurred gradually. Early Christian funerary monuments often continued the established tradition of upright stelae, initially bearing similarities in form to their Urartian predecessors. A fascinating testament to this transitional period is the existence of repurposed Urartian stelae, where simple Christian crosses were carved directly onto the older stone, sometimes alongside visible remnants of the original cuneiform script (Rojas 2023) [fig. 2].



Figure 2 Felipe Rojas, Urartian stelae with Christian crosses. n.d. Stone carvings. Unknown location. Felipe Rojas, copyright

This practice of incorporating the cross marked the crucial step in adapting existing monumental traditions to the new Christian faith. Over the following centuries, this fusion of the stela form with increasingly elaborate Christian symbolism, centered on the cross, evolved into the uniquely Armenian Khachkar (cross-stone). Khachkars, characterized by their intricate carvings of crosses often surrounded by geometric and vegetal motifs, became the quintessential Armenian Christian memorial monument within the historical homeland, serving funerary, dedicatory, and commemorative roles (Mkhitaryan, Avedian 2022) [fig. 3].



Figure 3 Author, Evolution from Urartian stela to khachkar. n.d. Diagram.
Author's collection. Author, copyright

However, while the Khachkar represents the pinnacle of this evolution in Armenia itself, this form is notably less prevalent among the surviving Armenian tombstones within Iran. The Armenian communities in Iran, shaped by distinct historical timelines, regional influences, and migration patterns, developed their own characteristic funerary expressions. As we will explore next, many existing tombstones, particularly in the older settlements of northwestern Iran, often take the form of simpler horizontal slabs, cage-like structures, or rectangular blocks, representing a significant stream within the broader Armenian memorial heritage that warrants specific investigation and categorization.

5 General Classification of Armenian Tombstones in Iran

Before examining the specific tombstone morphologies prevalent in northwestern Iran, it is useful to establish a broader classification of Armenian funerary monuments found across various regions of the country. Generally, these structures can be categorized into three main types based on their orientation and composition: Horizontal, Vertical, and Combined.

- 5.1. **Horizontal Tombstones:** These monuments lie flat over the grave. This broad category includes two principal forms based on their mass and typical location:
 - 5.1.1. The substantial, solid rectangular blocks, which, as will be detailed in the following section, are particularly characteristic of the older Armenian settlements in northwestern Iran [fig. 4].
 - 5.1.2. Thinner, slab-shaped stones, which have significantly less depth compared to the blocks and are more commonly found in the Armenian cemeteries of central Iran, such as those associated with New Julfa (Isfahan) and its surrounding villages [fig. 5].
- 5.2. **Vertical Tombstones:** These consist of single, upright stone slabs erected at the grave site. While varying in complexity, they typically feature a carved cross as a central element, distinguishing them as Christian memorials, though often differing in style and intricacy from the traditional Khachkars of Armenia [fig. 6].
- 5.3. **Combined Tombstones:** This type integrates both horizontal and vertical components. It usually features a horizontal element (which could be either a block or a slab) lying flat, primarily serving as the bearer of inscriptions like names and dates. Rising from this base is a vertical slab, typically adorned with a cross and potentially other symbolic motifs. Intriguingly, this composite structure might be interpreted as a possible continuation or adaptation of ancient memorial traditions, perhaps echoing the form of Urartian stelae which sometimes combined inscribed bases with symbolic upper sections [fig. 7].

Having established this general typology, we can now proceed to a more detailed examination of these forms, beginning with the variations of the rectangular block tombstones that dominate the funerary landscape of northwestern Iran.



Figure 4 SHA Archive, Surp Gevorg Cemetery (Malham) and Payajouk Cemetery. n.d. Photographs. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 5 Unknown author, Slab-shaped tombstones at Armenian cemetery. n.d. Stone tombstones



Figure 6 SHA Archive, Vertical tombstones at Malham Cemetery.
n.d. Photographs. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



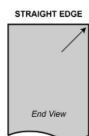
Figure 7 SHA Archive, Combined tombstones (Payajouk and Malham).
n.d. Photographs. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

6 **Typology of Armenian Tombstone Forms in Northwestern Iran**

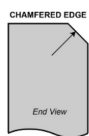
While the evolution of Armenian memorial art in the homeland culminated in the Khachkar, the funerary landscape of Armenian communities within Iran, particularly in the historically significant settlements of the northwest, developed distinct characteristics. Based on observations, especially in regions like Salmas, the predominant tombstone forms are not the vertical Khachkars, but rather horizontal stone blocks (Sadeghi, Javanmardzadeh 2022). These can be primarily categorized as follows:

- 6.1. **The Rectangular Block Tombstone:** this is the most common type observed in the specified region. It consists of a solid, horizontally oriented rectangular prism of stone. This fundamental shape exhibits several variations based on the treatment of its top edges:
 - 6.3.1. **Rectangular block with straight edges:** the simplest form, characterized by clean, right-angled edges along the top perimeter.
 - 6.3.2. **Rectangular block with chamfered edges:** features edges that are cut at an angle, creating a sloped transition rather than a sharp corner.
 - 6.3.3. **Rectangular block with rounded edges:** displays smoothly curved or bullnose edges instead of angular ones.
- 6.2. **Rectangular block with a beveled edge:** characterized by a distinct sloping surface along one or more top edges, potentially related to mounting, placement, or specific aesthetic traditions [fig. 8].
- 6.3. **The Cradle-shaped Tombstone (Օրորոտ - Ororots):** distinct from the flat-topped rectangular blocks is a form known in Armenian as Օրորոտ (Ororots), meaning 'cradle'. This type typically features a curved or gabled top surface, sometimes resembling a stylized cradle or sarcophagus lid. While numerous examples of the *Ororots* shape exist in major historical cemeteries within Armenia, such as the old Vagharshapat (Etchmiadzin) cemetery, this form appears significantly less frequently among the surviving tombstones in northwestern Iran compared to the various rectangular block types [fig. 9].

Therefore, the rectangular block tombstone, particularly with its variations in edge finishing, stands out as the most characteristic morphology for the Armenian funerary monuments historically established in northwestern Iran, especially noted in the Salmas region.



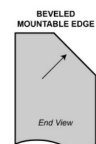
Salmast - Malham - 1880



Salmast - Khosrova - 1896



Salmast - Ghalasar - 1953



Salmast - Payajouk

Figure 8 SHA Archive, Rectangular block tombstones. n.d. Photographs. Iran. SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 9 Author; RAA Archive, Cradle-shaped tombstone (Ororots), n.d. Stone tombstones. Vagharshapat, Armenia; Haftvan, Salmast, Iran. Author / RAA Archive, copyright

7 Ram-shaped Tombstones: A Caucasus Tradition

Beyond the rectangular blocks and the less common *Ororots* forms predominantly discussed thus far, another highly distinctive type of funerary monument is found at Armenian gravesites, particularly in northwestern Iran: the Ram-shaped Tombstone. These remarkable monuments consist of stone skillfully carved, either fully or partially, into the figure of a ram. It is crucial to note that this tradition is not uniquely or exclusively Armenian. Instead, ram-shaped funerary markers are a well-documented phenomenon across the wider Caucasus region, utilized by various ethnic and cultural groups inhabiting the area over centuries (Aghdam, Hajizadeh 2020). Their presence among Armenian graves in northwestern Iran points towards shared historical customs, regional artistic dialogues, or influences prevalent in this geographically interconnected zone (Aghdam et al. 2022). While characteristic of the northwestern regions bordering the Caucasus, these ram figures appear to be significantly less common, or perhaps largely absent, among the known Armenian burial grounds in Central Iran, such as those in Isfahan. This apparent geographical distinction suggests notable regional variations in funerary practices within the broader Iranian Armenian community. These unique zoomorphic monuments add another fascinating layer to the typology of Armenian memorial stones in Iran [fig. 10].

Having outlined the principal structural forms encountered – ranging from horizontal blocks and slabs to vertical markers, combined types, and these culturally specific ram figures – the focus of the analysis will shift to the rich visual language expressed through the motifs and symbols carved onto the surfaces of these diverse tombstone types.

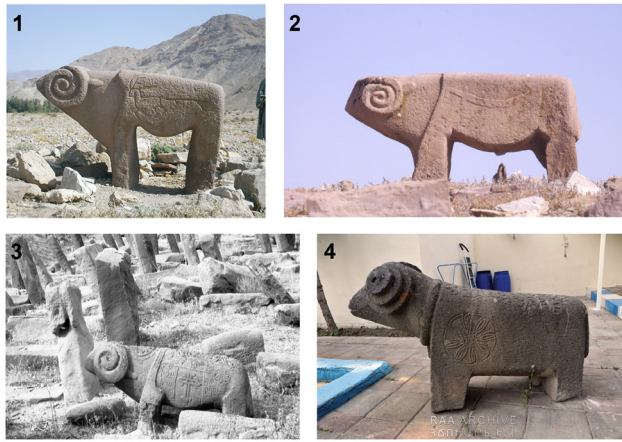


Figure 10 Adriano Alpago Novello; RAA Archive, Ram-shaped tombstones. n.d.
Stone sculptures. Iran. Novello / RAA Archive, copyright

8 Motifs and Symbols on Armenian Tombstones in Iran

Beyond their structural forms, Armenian tombstones in Iran are rich repositories of visual language, conveyed through a diverse array of carved motifs and symbols. These decorations provide insights into the beliefs, identities, and lives of the individuals commemorated. While inscriptions offer textual information, these symbols could also have served as important visual cues for identification, particularly in times or communities where literacy was not universal. These motifs can be broadly categorized into three distinct groups: foundational symbols, gender-specific representations, and indicators of occupation or status.

8.1. **Foundational Symbols:** certain symbols carry deep, often ancient meanings related to faith and cosmology.

8.1.1. **The Cross:** as expected in a Christian context, the Cross is a prevalent symbol, appearing in various forms, signifying faith and salvation [fig. 11].

8.1.2. **The Arevakhach (Armenian Wheel of Eternity):** this ancient Armenian symbol, often resembling a swirling sun or wheel, is frequently found. Within Armenian culture, it powerfully represents the concepts of eternity, perpetual motion, life, death, and rebirth. While visually similar solar or wheel symbols exist in other cultures representing concepts like time, the cosmos, or the sun, the *Arevakhach* carries specific resonance within Armenian identity and spiritual

heritage, predating but also incorporated into Christian usage [fig. 12].

- 8.1.3. **The Tree of Life:** a symbol with near-universal reach, the Tree of Life appears on Armenian tombstones in Iran as well. Its interpretation is multifaceted, potentially evoking the Garden of Eden, serving as a cosmic axis connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld, or representing spiritual growth, knowledge, wisdom, and the continuity of life [fig. 13].
- 8.2. **Gender-Specific Representations:** many tombstones feature motifs intended to signify the gender of the deceased, often depicted in panels, sometimes noted as being near the base of the gravestone (Ghorbani, Rahmani unpublished).
 - 8.1.4. **For Women:** common symbols include items associated with domestic life, personal grooming, or craft, such as scissors, combs (sometimes specified as double-edged), mirrors, or kohl-pins. Representations of weaving, like a carpet or a half-finished textile on a loom, also signify female identity and activity.
 - 8.1.5. **For Men:** motifs often depict traditionally male roles, activities, or attributes, such as weapons, figures on horseback, or other scenes representing key aspects of their lives [fig. 14].
- 8.3. **Occupational and Status Indicators:** symbols and depictions were frequently used to denote the deceased's profession, craft, or social standing, offering a glimpse into their role within the community. Common examples include tools of a trade, such as scissors potentially indicating a tailor (distinct from the gendered use) or a gun for a hunter. Beyond tools, the depiction of specific attire or dress served as a clear indicator of status or role. For instance, Armenian clergy members depicted on their tombstones are often easily distinguishable by their characteristic clerical garments, clearly marking their position within the religious hierarchy and society (Jahanmard, Mohamadzade 2023) [fig. 15].

It is crucial to remember, as historian Marshall G.S. Hodgson suggested regarding symbols in general, that "In the course of history symbols live and change: once established in concrete form, they may move from context to context and be used to diverse ends" (Hodgson 1959). Over time, the original, deeply felt meaning of a symbol might fade or undergo "some sort of desacralization", eventually persisting merely as "sheer un-understood tradition" valued primarily for its "esthetic form" (Hodgson 1959). This perspective is vital when interpreting the motifs on older tombstones, acknowledging that

their meaning for the contemporary observer might differ from their significance to the community that created them.

The intricate symbols and motifs carved onto Armenian tombstones offer a profound, albeit sometimes historically layered, insight into the community's beliefs, identities, and lived experiences. While these individual decorations tell specific stories etched in stone, understanding these silent sentinels fully also requires considering the broader context of the sacred grounds where they are located. Armenian cemeteries in Iran served not only as exclusive resting places dedicated to preserving the memory of the Armenian community but also fulfilled a vital role within the wider landscape of Christianity in the region. Exploring this dimension reveals further complexities in the history and usage of these important sites, particularly regarding burial practices involving other Christian groups.

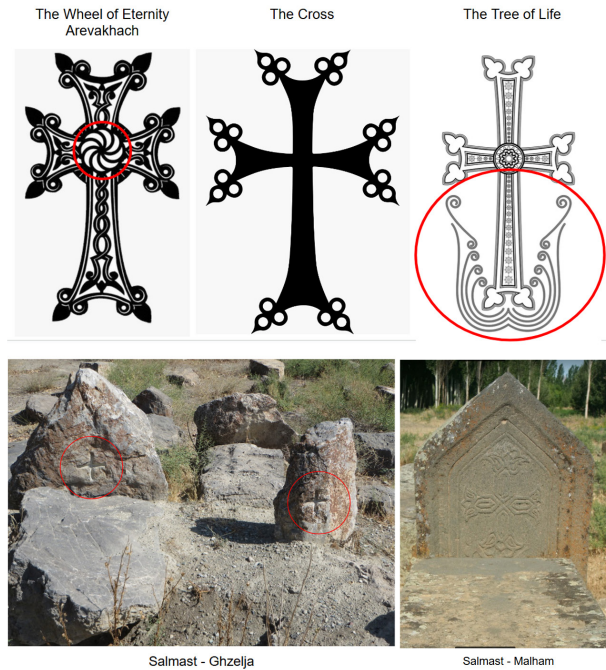


Figure 11 Author; SHA Archive, Cross motif on Armenian tombstones. n.d. Diagram and photographs. Iran. Author / SHA Archive, copyright



Figure 12 Author; RAA Archive; SHA Archive, Arevakhach (Wheel of Eternity). n.d. Diagram and photographs. Iran. Author / RAA / SHA, copyright



Figure 13 Author; various sources, Tree of Life motif. n.d. Diagram and photographs. Iran. Internet / Google Maps / SHA Archive, copyright

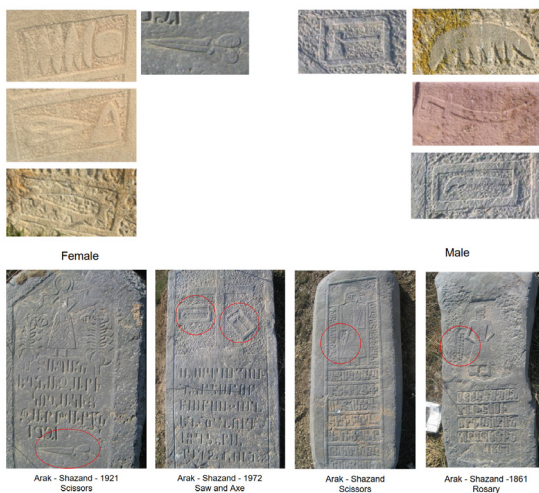


Figure 14 Author; Gender-specific representations on Armenian tombstones. n.d. Stone carvings. Iran. Google Maps, copyright



Figure 15 SHA Archive; Adriano Alpag0 Novello; Google Maps, Occupational and status indicators on tombstones. n.d. Stone carvings. Iran. Various sources, copyright

9 Christian Burial Practices Beyond the Armenian Community

Broadening the scope beyond the Armenian community itself, the historical context of Christian burial practices in Iran reveals an important role played by Armenian cemeteries. Throughout the centuries, non-Armenian Christians, particularly foreigners such as diplomats, merchants, missionaries, or travelers who died while in Iran, were typically interred in the established Christian cemeteries available. Given the prominent and long-standing presence of the Armenian Church, these cemeteries were often Armenian ones. Reflecting this practice, many Armenian cemeteries in Iran, both historic and contemporary, feature dedicated sections specifically designated for the burial of these foreigners [fig. 16]. Furthermore, in certain cases, perhaps depending on the individual's status or affiliation, burials were not confined to the general cemetery grounds but took place within the church building itself or in the adjacent church courtyard. Acknowledging this aspect adds another dimension to the understanding of Armenian cemeteries in Iran, highlighting their function as central Christian burial sites within the country and indicating the potential presence of diverse funerary traditions and memorial styles within these spaces.



Figure 16 Unknown author, Burial sections for foreigners (Polish and Russian). n.d. Memorials and tombstones. Dulab Cemetery, Tehran, Iran. Google Maps, copyright

10 The Shift to Urban Cemeteries in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century marked a significant turning point for the Armenian community in Iran, driven largely by the country's modernization and industrialization efforts. This period witnessed a substantial internal migration as many Armenians moved from traditional rural villages, particularly in regions like Azerbaijan and the areas surrounding Isfahan, towards burgeoning urban centers such as Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz in search of new economic and social opportunities (Barry 2024).

A direct consequence of this demographic shift was the gradual decline and, in many cases, eventual abandonment of historical Armenian cemeteries located in the depopulating villages. These sites, while invaluable historical records, saw decreasing use. Concurrently, the Armenian cemeteries in the major cities experienced significant growth and increased importance, becoming central repositories of community memory and identity for the expanding urban populations [fig. 17].

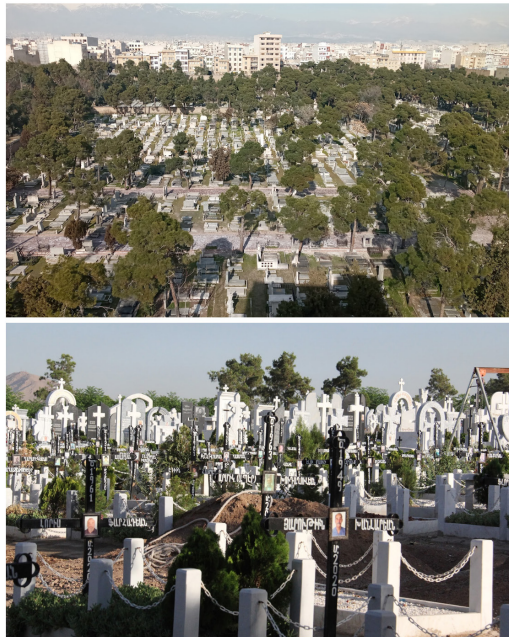


Figure 17 Unknown author, Urban Armenian cemeteries (Dulab and Nor Burastan). n.d. Photographs. Tehran, Iran. Google Maps, copyright

As Armenian communities in cities like Tehran thrived both economically and numerically, their cemeteries reflected this vitality. Alongside the continuation of traditional tombstone forms and motifs, new styles, materials, and artistic influences began to emerge, shaped by changing tastes, available resources, urban aesthetics, and evolving funerary art trends globally [fig. 18]. This resulted in a diverse, and sometimes eclectic, mix of memorial types within these modern urban burial grounds, standing alongside or replacing older traditions (Yavari, Ayvazian 2018) [fig. 19].

These thriving urban cemeteries, therefore, represent crucial sites for understanding not only the demographic shifts of the twentieth century but also the adaptation and evolution of Armenian funerary practices and artistic expression within the dynamic context of modern Iranian city life.



Figure 18 Author; Contemporary Armenian tombstones with traditional motifs.
n.d. Stone monuments. Iran. Google Maps, copyright



Figure 19 Unknown author, Eclectic tombstones at Nor Burastan Cemetery. n.d. Stone monuments. Tehran, Iran. Google Maps, copyright

11 Challenges and Preservation

The rich history and cultural heritage embodied by Armenian tombstones in Iran face threats, as evidenced by instances of destruction and vandalism. While the most extensively documented cases of large-scale destruction of Armenian cultural heritage, including tombstones, have occurred in regions outside of Iran, reports also indicate instances of damage and neglect within Iran itself (Short, Crispin, Baker 2017). For example, Tehran's historic Doulab Cemetery has reportedly suffered from neglect and vandalism. This vulnerability is particularly acute for cemeteries located in rural villages where Armenian communities have significantly diminished or disappeared entirely. Lacking local oversight, these remote sites are increasingly susceptible to specific threats like illicit treasure hunting and the plundering of stones for use as readily available construction materials [fig. 20]. While the systematic and widespread erasure witnessed in Nakhchivan may not have been replicated within Iran to the same degree, any instance of damage or neglect poses a threat to these invaluable cultural testimonies. The underlying causes often point to broader socio-political tensions or a lack of sufficient awareness and protective measures. The loss of these monuments has a profound impact on Armenian cultural heritage and collective memory. The destruction of tombstones not only eliminates physical evidence of the past but also severs a crucial link to the history and identity of the Armenian community, both within Iran and across the diaspora.



Figure 20 SHA Archive, Rural Armenian cemeteries (Payajouk and Malham). n.d.
Photographs. Salmast, Iran. SHA Archive, copyright

12 Conclusion

Armenian tombstones in Iran serve as silent yet eloquent reflections of the enduring traditions, the evolving identity within the diaspora, and the cultural continuity of a people with a long and complex history in the region. These funerary monuments embody the persistence of religious, artistic, and cultural traditions brought by Armenians from their ancestral homeland. Key symbols such as the cross, the Arevakhach, and the Tree of Life continue to appear on these tombstones within the Iranian context, demonstrating a remarkable continuity of core cultural elements. Despite their status as a minority within Iran, Armenian communities have actively maintained their heritage, a fact clearly evident in the enduring symbols and

artistic styles found on their tombstones. Moreover, these funerary monuments reflect the adaptation and evolution of Armenian identity within the Iranian diaspora. They bear witness to the influences of Iranian culture and the unique experiences shaped by life in the diaspora. Events of historical significance, such as the Armenian Genocide and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, have also potentially left their imprint on funerary practices and memorialization. In essence, the tombstones serve as a tangible record of the Armenian community's journey within Iran, illustrating both the preservation of their core identity and their adaptation to the cultural and political landscape of their host country. Perhaps most poignantly, Armenian tombstones in abandoned or significantly diminished settlements across Iran stand as crucial historical records of communities that have undergone substantial change or even disappeared entirely. They are vital for understanding the historical geography and the rich cultural tapestry of Armenian presence throughout Iran, offering silent testimony to lives lived and communities that once thrived.

In conclusion, the Armenian tombstones scattered across Iran represent far more than mere burial markers. They are invaluable cultural artifacts that offer a profound window into the history, beliefs, artistic traditions, and evolving identity of Armenian communities within the Iranian context. From the ancient echoes potentially found in repurposed Urartian stelae to the intricate symbolism of Khachkars, the enigmatic Vishapakars, and the narrative details of gender and occupation, these silent sentinels tell a multifaceted story of endurance, adaptation, and cultural continuity. They stand as poignant reminders of a long-standing Armenian presence in Iran, offering crucial testimonies to communities that have shaped and been shaped by the Iranian landscape. Further research, particularly detailed regional studies focusing on specific tombstone styles and symbolism, comparative analyses with Armenian funerary art in other regions, and the application of modern digital technologies for preservation and analysis, holds the potential to further illuminate the rich narratives etched in these stones.

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This volume reassesses Armenian art in Iran through the interpretive frameworks of transculturality, connected histories, and cultural entanglement. Contributions by Patrick Donabédian, Levon Chookaszian, Maurizio Boriani, Andreh Marouti, Marco Brambilla, and Talinn Grigor explore architecture, monumental painting, funerary monuments, heritage conservation, and modern architecture, demonstrating that Armenian artistic production in Iran developed through continuous interaction with Persian, Caucasian, Mediterranean, and European traditions. Moving beyond national paradigms, the volume presents Armenian art as a dynamic process of cultural co-creation that reshaped identities over two millennia and offers a new perspective on artistic exchange across Eurasia.



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