

Architectural Decorations of Armenian Churches of the 7th and the 10th-11th Centuries and Their Presumably Sasanian Sources

The first attempts to study the interaction of the medieval architectural traditions in the vast region from the Mediterranean Sea to the Caspian Sea were made in the beginning of the 20th century, in the writings of Josef Strzygowski, Nikolai Marr, Jurgis Baltrušaitis and Iosif Orbeli¹. This problem was rooted in the European, and Russian in particular, tradition to research artistic and architectural phenomena in a broad historical and cultural context, but this tradition was successfully opposed by a narrower and less consolidated understanding of cultural development. In the second half of the 20th century, all countries of the region saw the development of local research schools, which prioritized declaring everything important in the culture of certain peoples to be autochthonous and aimed at finding out the local, »original« roots of architecture. Political preferences then determined scientific goals to a much greater extent than today, when we can witness the return of the original balanced academic approach. Recent publications prove this trend, reflecting the complexity and diversity of the connections of any major phenomenon of Armenian, Georgian, Byzantine or Seljuk culture with neighboring traditions and with the localization of migrating ideas².

Late Antique and Medieval Armenian architecture, which saw its first heyday in the 7th century, seems to be among the most interesting phenomena in the universal history of architecture. According to one of the latest studies, the art of ecclesiastic building of the 7th century performed the spiritual aspiration of that epoch and brightly manifested the intellectual potential of the circle of Armenian patrons and architects. In their creativity, Armenian masters of the 7th-century tradition based on the achievements of the Late Antique architecture, its colossal heritage. There the most large-scale ideas were realized and the closest ties with the 6th-century Byzantine architecture were built³. A hundred years ago, Josef Strzygowski suggested that Armenian architecture played a

transitional role between the Iranian domed structures and Byzantine Justinianic constructions (6th century)⁴. Today, some points of that largely forgotten theory require revision and further consideration. Moreover, we shall try to prove the important role of Early-Byzantine cathedrals into the forming of Armenian domed churches. Another source for builders of Armenian churches was Sasanian art as a part of the Iranian tradition, also widespread in the regions of Eastern Christianity. We must remember that Armenian history involved close relations with the Iranian world, apart of which is sometimes called Armenia itself⁵.

Having refuted the above-mentioned ideas of Strzygowski, we also concluded that his several ideas deserve our attention. In particular, the impact both of Byzantine and Iranian models in the creation of a specific shape of the under-dome squinch-pendentive transitions by Armenian masters of the early 7th century seems obvious⁶. Another small study has been dedicated to the conception of verticality in Iranian and Armenian architecture⁷. Several motives on the facades of Armenian churches – reliefs and ornamentation – were reinterpreted in recent years, considering their probable Sasanian art origin with the attempts of their new meaning in the reality of Christian culture⁸.

Having noticed several similarities, we can sometimes only discuss presumably Sasanian sources of Armenian decorations, which is due to the following factors:

- 1) We have no clear understanding about Sasanian architectural decoration and about all its differences from the decoration of previous Iranian historical periods;
- 2) some motives of ornamentation derived from Classical Antiquity in Armenia itself in such types as may be considered to be Sasanian interpretations;
- 3) some of the Sasanian elements were introduced into Armenia from Islamic Iranian art.

1 Strzygowski, *Baukunst*. – Marr, Ani. – Baltrušaitis, *Études*. – Orbeli, *Trudy*.

2 For example: Donabédian, *L'âge*. – Kazaryan, *Tserkovnaya arkhitektura*. – Maranci, *Vigilant Powers*. – Blessing, *Rebuilding*.

3 Kazaryan, *Tserkovnaya arkhitektura*.

4 Strzygowski, *Baukunst*.

5 Churšudjan, *Armenija*.

6 Kazaryan, *Trompovo-parusnyi*.

7 Kazaryan/Shukurov, *Ideja*.

8 Mikayelyan, *Acanthus and Palmette*.



Fig. 1 Odzun Church of the first half of the 7th century: the 5th-6th-centuries relief's fragment in the pillar. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

The scope of this paper will be to discuss the impact of the Sasanian elements in the decorations of Armenian churches of the 7th and the 10th-11th centuries. Of course, the creativity of Armenian artists had been inspired by some motives of Sasanian art already before the 7th century.

Only by a deep cognate connection between two cultures can we explain the presence of imperial Sasanian ribbons and spread wings on the base of relief crosses on early-Christian Armenian monuments. Broad ribbons, usually covered with transversal lines, are known on crosses on the impost capitals of single nave churches in Avan, Agarak and Pashvank of the 5th-6th century, in the design of the portals of the Yereriik basilica of the late 5th-early 6th century, on the relief fragments of the 5th-6th century, inserted into the masonry of the pillars of the 7th century Odzun Church (**fig. 1**), on the facade of the 7th century church in Ardjahovit, etc. The motif of paired wings, which is also very common in Sasanian art as a symbol of victory and royalty, can be found on crosses on some memorial steles of the 6th-7th century, and in the architectural

décor of the same period: on the steles of Mughni, Dvin (**fig. 2**), Kasagh, on the 7th century fragment of an architrave from Dvin, on the 6th century cross-piece of the door of Surb Vartan chapel in Zovuni, etc.⁹. Sasanian culture could also have influenced the secular architecture of Armenia of the early Christian period, almost all of which is lost, but excavations made on the site of the royal tomb complex in Akhtsk discovered a number of ceramic plates used in the decoration of buildings, like in the Sasanian tradition. On those plates, there are images of animals, including the eagle with ribbons on its neck¹⁰.

Images of some sacred animals and hunting scenes were extremely popular in Sasanian art and were used in the décor of palaces. One of the most significant monuments of Armenian secular architecture – the palace of King Gagik Artsruni (904-943), today exists only in the descriptions of its contemporary – the author of the history of the Artsruni house. He describes the design and the interior decoration of the palace, where there were images of numerous animals, hunting scenes and royal feasts¹¹ – themes especially common on Sasanian precious vessels and wall-painting. Moreover, on Tovma Artsruni's and his anonymous successor's orders, such themes were used in the reliefs of King Gagik's palace church of the Holy Cross, which has been perfectly preserved to the present day and is now a most vivid example of the Sasanian parallels in the art of Armenia, which will be discussed in more detail later in the article.

In any way, »western« (for the Armenian landscape) tradition predominated, especially still at the beginning of the 7th century, both for churches' plans and for decoration. The forms of Armenian churches, the profiles of archivolts and cornices were very close to those known from the monuments of Cappadocia, Isauria, Syria and Northern Mesopotamia¹². Avan Cathedral of the late 6th century finely represents the character of architecture and its decoration. How can we explain this kind of orientation? Beside the religious differences and periodical confrontation with Iranians in the 4th-5th centuries, it was also the problem of legitimization of the Sasanians for the Armenian nobles. The Arsacids had been enthroned in Armenia 200 years longer than in Iran, where the Parthian dynasty was displaced by the Sasanids in 224. We must consider the origin of the St Gregory Illuminator from the Parthian family and the history of Gregory's escape from the Sasanians into the Roman Empire, his triumphal return to Armenia as a missionary of Christianity. The authority of Gregory and the presence of his family members on the Patriarchal throne up to the middle of the 7th century may have protected Christian Armenia from Sasanian cultural influence.

In any case, the situation changed in the beginning of the 7th century when Iranian military expansion took place, and whole of Armenia was integrated into the Sasanian Empire. It

9 Paglazova, Tekor. – Compareti, Wings. – Mikayelyan, Compositional Schemes.
10 Simonyan, Aghtsk 27-30 figs 40-44.

11 Artsruni, History 357-358. – Orbeli, Achamar 35-37. – Jones, Aght'amar 53-54.
12 Kazaryan, Architektura Armenii.

Fig. 2 Dvin, fragment of stele, 6th-7th centuries. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).



could have been an attempt at rebuilding a common political and cultural world, arising both from the Armenian nobility and from the central power, by *Shahinshah* Khusraw II Parwiz (591-628), who issued a special privilege to the Christians of his country¹³. It was the first and only attempt for dialogue after the previous Armenian revolts of the 5th century.

Just at this time occurred the activity of Smbat Bagratuni, called Khusraw Shum. According to Sebeos, the Catholicos Komitas Aghtsetsi (613-628) had successfully participated in the Council of Ctesiphon (Tizbon). The governing of Komitas, an outstanding Church figure, theologian, hymnographer and innovator in architecture, was a bright chapter of ecclesiastic building. Komitas finished Dvin Cathedral, which was started by Smbat Bagratuni, built the church of the Holy Witnesses of Christ or the church of Hripsime in Vagharshapat (AD 613) and reconstructed the oldest cathedral in Vagharshapat (later called Etchmiadzin).

Monuments built in the epoch of Catholicos Komitas demonstrate an important step of the evolution of the under cupola transitional construction. In Hripsime they introduced conical squinches not known in earlier edifices with precise

dating. Large squinches in the corner niches are supported by fan squinches – a unique and decorative form. On the corners of the large squinches there are smaller ones, and a polyhedron formed by them is crowned with a circular cornice. In Avan and Etchmiadzin too, an under cupola base was built in the zone of arches, and the cupola drum with openings is a separate form (**fig. 3**). There is an obvious genetic link to the Constantinople structure but the squinches reflect an influence from Sasanian construction. We can mention the fire-temple of Neysar as one which has survived¹⁴.

A pure Sasanian system developed in Northern Mesopotamian architecture, as well as in Italy – in the 5th-century baptisterium of San Giovanni in Neapolis (Naples), the mausoleum of Santo Prosdocimo in the Basilica di Santa Giustina in Padua of 500-507 and the cathedral of Pisa of the 1080s¹⁵. In general, the zone of transitional construction of the Mesopotamian church of Deir-Zafaran are very similar to the central cells of the zhamatuns of Armenian monasteries (Kecharis, second half of the 12th century; Nor-Getik, late 12th-early 13th centuries, etc.), with the only difference that the lighting in the latter is achieved by an oculus in the cloistered vault.

¹³ Lukonin, Iran 180-188.

¹⁴ Kazaryan, Trompovo-parusnyi. – Kazaryan, Cerkovnaja arhitektura 1, 234-243.

¹⁵ Kazaryan, Trompovo-parusnyi 16. 18 figs 17-18.



Fig. 3 Vagharshapat, St Hripsime Church (613): view to the dome. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

Another unusual form, originating in the time of Komitas, is a large cross-like picture on the surfaces of Armenian domes. We can see them in the preserved 7th-century churches of T'alın, Garnahovit, but the first example probably was on the dome of the Hripsime Church. On the one hand, it could be related to the mosaic cross, originally represented on the dome of the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople. On the other hand, the cross of Hripsime Church, shaped like sun-

beams, which, as well as the depiction of a twelve-rayed form reminiscent of the sun, has some analogy in Sasanian architecture, i. e. on the dome of the aforementioned fire temple of Neysar¹⁶. We can assume that the sunbeams were present in the now lost rendering of the domes of other Sasanian buildings. Indirectly, the widespread tradition of decorating domes with sunbeams manifests itself in numerous examples of different ribs in the domes of 11th-12th-century Iranian

¹⁶ Kazaryan/Shukurov, *Ideja*. – Kazaryan, *Cerkovnaja arhitektura* 1, 206-208.

Fig. 4 Vagharshapat, Etchmiadzin Cathedral, drum (ca. 620): Eastern archivolt. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).



mosques: in Zavar, Ardistan, Isfahan (the southern dome of the Great Mosque, 1072-1092).

However, since there is no direct similarity between the figures of Neysar and Hripsime, either in the scheme, or in the form of sunbeams, or in the content, it can be assumed that the creator of the Armenian church, most likely familiar with Iranian domes, adopted the idea of creating such decorations and tried to embody it in a new way within the framework of conformity with Christian theology¹⁷.

The church of Hripsime and the new cupola of Etchmiadzin Cathedral opened new directions to the evolution of forms of window jambs, cornices and their ornaments. For the first time, semicircular archivolts (edges) with horizontal wings placed on the level of the skewbacks of the windows' arches appear. Various profiles usually joined with a wide band of carved ornament. As well as the simplified Hellenistic motives, there are geometric and floral ones, known in samples of Sasanian carved stucco. Especially close to Sasanian models is the garland of the eastern archivolt (**fig. 4**), which motive is the same as the wreath around the «senmurv» of the costume of Khusraw in Taq-i-Bustan¹⁸. The curly stems with half-palmettes are known on stucco reliefs from the Palace I at Kish¹⁹. Also, the columns' capitals of Etchmiadzin's cupola drum have shapes between Hellenistic and Sasanian examples. But they seem much more related to Iranian motives of palmettes, half-palmettes and flower-buds. The arcade order with twisted columns, relief bust portraits of

the Twelve Apostles in frames decorate the drum outside, they are elements of Roman triumphal imperial architecture. From the outside, the tholobate of the 7th century, according to the reconstruction, was crowned with a zigzag broken cornice shaping a gable over each facet and serving as a base for the folded umbrella roofing of the dome (**fig. 5**). From an iconographic point of view, the dome of Etchmiadzin is similar to the Cubiculum of the Holy Sepulchre known, particularly, from images on *ampullae* from the Holy Land²⁰. In Etchmiadzin there is, evidently, the oldest preserved three-dimensional replica of this model, though they departed far from the initial composition. In particular, the structure was adapted to the function of a dome and windows completed with images of the Apostles. The theme of heavenly light is obvious in a *sharakan* (kontakion) of Komitas and in other works of medieval Armenian literature. As well as rays passing from the centre of the cupola's hemisphere and in Hripsime descending in threes on each side, i. e. towards the windows, in Etchmiadzin there were descending ribs from the highest point of the upper dome or vaulted drum strictly according to the lay-out of the windows. The images of the Apostles encircled the tholobate of Etchmiadzin marking each source of light with a frame-sign. Thus, the originally conceived idea has something in common with the Byzantine composition with Christ and the Apostles in the cupola which had existed, perhaps, from the 6th century. A heterogeneous decoration of the arches of the Etchmiadzin drum, twisted

17 Kazaryan, *Tserkovnaya arkhitektura*. 1, 208-209.

18 Ackerman, *Textiles* fig. 242.

19 Baltrušaitis/Poppe, *Sasanian stucco* fig. 194b.

20 Grabar, *Ampoules*.



Fig. 5 Vaghharshapat, Etchmiadzin Cathedral, drum (ca. 620): reconstruction by A. Kazaryan 2007. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

columns crowned with capitals with palmettes, acanthus and buds reproduced the atmosphere of the Garden of Eden and, perhaps, hinted at the image of the Tree of Life with its twelve kinds of fruits (Rev. 22:2). The idea of the Apostles' mission was supported with an image of the so-called Senmurv²¹ on one of the capitals (fig. 6). It may be the first known »Senmurv« in the art of the Christian world and thus belongs to the same period as the Sasanian examples.

Images of this fantastic winged creature with the forepart of a dog and a peacock tail were common in late Sasanian art, in the 6th-7th centuries, especially in toreutics, and also on the wall-panels used in the decoration of palaces. According to the latest research, »Senmurv« was one of the incarnations of Khvarnah (new Persian Farr) – the royal glory, fortune and divine patronage²², which explains its popularity in Sa-

sanian and early Islamic rich fabrics used in royal attire. The appearance of this creature on Christian monuments and in the décor of the Omayyad palaces of the first half of the 8th century (Mshatta, Qasr al-Khair al-Gabri, Hirbat al-Mafjar²³) was associated with its symbolism of heavenly patronage and royal majesty. Most likely, the image of »Senmurv« on the capitals of the drum of the Etchmiadzin church symbolized divine presence and providence. Just as the symbols of imperial power in Rome (wreaths, medallions, etc.) passed into early Christian symbolism and acquired the meaning of the victory of the Christian church, so the Sasanian royal symbolism in the form of ribbons, paired wings and the »Senmurv« passed into the early medieval art of Armenia and Transcaucasia for the glorification of the Cross, and, in the case of the Etchmiadzin church, the mission of the Apostles.

21 Kazaryan, Kafedralnyi sobor 89-90 fig. 86. – Kazaryan, Tserkovnaya arkhitektura. 1, 222-223 fig. 159. – Identification of this creature with the bird Saena of Avesta and Senmurv of the late Sasanian sources was first made by K. Trever in the 1930s and predominated in scientific literature till recent times. According to her opinion, the Senmurv (and its famous images in art) embodied three elements and it was a fertility deity, living on the »Tree of All Seeds« (Trever, Senmurv). However, this hypothesis has been recently revised on the basis of new discoveries and re-readings of sources. The traditional Senmurv is now

considered by most scholars as the incarnation of Farr, whereas his literary prototype most likely represented a huge bird similar to a peacock, eagle or phoenix, like Simorgh in the poem Shahnameh (Compareti, So-Called Senmurv 185-200). – Cf. the contribution of Compareti in this volume.

22 Shenkar, Xvarānah.

23 Schlumberger, Qasr el-Heir el-Gharbi 355. – Hamilton, Khirbat al Mafjar 253 fig. 118a.

Fig. 6 Vagharshapat, Etchmiadzin Cathedral, the drum of ca. 620: »senmurv« on the capital. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).



The tholobate of Etchmiadzin Cathedral became the rare example of the Roman order arcade in the Christian era. In Armenia, the type of blind arcade decoration became far more widespread. It originated in the architecture of Armenian cathedrals of the 640s, created by catholicos Nerses the Builder. Both of his constructions, especially the famous church of Zwartnots (641-661), were inspired by the highest examples of Late Antique and Byzantine architecture. The theme of the blind arcade was developed in Early Christian sculpture imitating architectural images. There are such examples as a Roman silver casket from the end of the 4th century²⁴ and a funerary relief dated to the 6th century from Constantinople which looks like a side of a sarcophagus²⁵. An unusual example close to Armenian ones is the church in Flabios (present-day Alajami in Kadırlı) in Cilicia dated to the end of the 5th or to the beginning of the 6th century²⁶. Also, the main facade of the Sasanian palace in Tāq-i Kistrā on a bank of the Tigris, in the region of Ctesiphon, is divided into two parts with a huge entrance arch (iwan). The walls of both parts are partitioned with architraves held by pilasters in three zones; each of them is decorated with groups of niches set in two rows and divided with double half-columns. These small and flat niches were crowned with arches or conches²⁷.

All these and many other examples developed Classical antique tectonic structures. We have to state that all mentioned examples had no full-scale (in the whole facade) mani-

festation in monumental architecture of Byzantium and Italy till the construction of the Baptistry in Florence (consecrated in 1059) and the cathedral of Pisa (since the 1090s). Nevertheless, we should note the existence of another group of buildings, with a large-scale, different kind of order decoration. Some of them are among the Armenian monuments – they are the churches of Tekor (480s) and Yereruik (5th-6th century), whose walls are decorated with pilasters²⁸. Also, we know the attempt to produce an arcade-like order in the gate of Resafa in Syria (6th century), very close to the Iranian border. At the same time, a splendid example of the oriental representation of the Roman arcade order in all the height of the building is seen on the facades of the Sasanian complex in Firuzabad. Typologically, the shapes of the appearance of the facades of this group of oriental buildings are different from the Armenian 7th-century blind arcades. But just the scale of these monuments' decoration could indicate the creative interpretation of the blind arcade on the churches of the Catholicos Nerses the Builder.

The blind arcade created by the 7th-century Armenian architects has an unusually large scale, and it seems to be a result of the aim to find an order, which was obligatory for classical architecture and unusual for the Middle Ages. This happened at the first period of the flourishing of Armenian architecture, its »golden age«²⁹, when the unprecedented quantity of new types of domed churches was created not

24 Beckwith, *Early Christian ill.* 39.

25 Rodley *Byzantine art ill.* 51.

26 Hild/Hellenkemper, *Kilikien ill.* 335. – Kazaryan, *Fasadnaja arkatura 454.* – Donabédian, *L'âge* 195.

27 Sarre/Herzfeld, *Archäologische Reise 3 (Tafelbd.)*, pl. XXXIX-XLIV.

28 About these churches see: Toramanian, *Tekori.* – Marr, *Ererujkskaja bazilika.*

29 Last studies on this epoch: Donabédian, *L'âge.* – Kazaryan, *Cerkovnaja arhitektura.* – Maranci, *Vigilant Powers.*



Fig. 7 Church of the Holy Cross on Aghtamar, 915-921: gryphon on the south facade. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

only for Armenia, but also beyond. At the same period, for the first time facades of churches of Zvartnots, Dvin, Talin, and Irind were decorated with blind arcades.

The »golden age« was interrupted by two centuries of Arab occupation and the architects of the next period of flourishing, in the late 10th and the first decades of the 11th century, again addressed the ideas mostly from the treasury of ancient classics. It was a period of the rise of the Artsrunid and Bagratid dynasty and the forming of the special atmosphere in the Armenian capital of Ani, which was conducive for the interests of customers and architects in aesthetic values of the ancient classical tradition. Also, just from the last quarter of the 10th century on, very close to the ancient order interpretation the blind arcade was developed, based on the achievement of 7th-century architecture³⁰.

The 9th-10th centuries saw a revival of the Sasanian traditions in the Abassid culture – a trend that is reflected in the art of the Byzantine Empire. Thus, the »Senmurv« appears on one of the towers of the walls of Constantinople³¹, on

the 10th century marble plates in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum³², on the western facade of the St Sion Church of Ateni³³, etc. In Armenia, from the beginning of the 10th century, we can see a new stage of turning to Sasanian images and ornamental motifs, sometimes indirectly through early Islamic models.

Among those who wrote about the Sasanian parallels in the Church of the Holy Cross (915-921) on Akhtamar Island (Lake Van) were I. Orbeli and S. Ter-Nersisyan³⁴. A number of images of fantastic animals in the reliefs of the church reveal Sasanid iconography: both in the approach to the images and in decorating the animal bodies with plant motifs – half-palmettes³⁵. The griffin and the bird-ram (the embodiment of Farn) on the southern facade are juxtaposed to the figures of holy martyrs – the ancestors of Gagik Artsruni – and thus symbolized the prince's power and glory (fig. 7)³⁶. In the scenes of the story of the prophet Jonah, the image of the sea monster is conveyed through the characteristic features of the same »Senmurv«, closest to the images on the 7th-century

30 Detailed analysis see: Kazaryan, »Classical« Trend.

31 Eyice, Senmurvenrelief 110-119. – Cf. the contribution of Asutay-Effenberger in this volume.

32 Grabar, Sculptures 107 pl. LVII.

33 Aladaşvili, Skul'ptura 229-233 fig. 228. – About the dating of the relief see: Kazaryan, Cerkovnaja arhitektura 3, 401-402.

34 Orbeli, Aghtamar 113-117. – Der Nersessian, Aght'amar 25-35.

35 Orbeli, Aghtamar 113-117. – Mikayelyan, »Flourished« animals.

36 Mikayelyan/Hakobyan, Mythical Creatures.



Fig. 8 Church of Holy Cross on Aghtamar, 915-921: southern wall with ornamental border. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

Iranian silks (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)³⁷. Images of heraldic goats on the sides of the Tree of Life, bears, birds and other animals in the frieze of the vineyard on Akhtamar have obvious parallels with Sassanid vessels on 6th-7th-century wall-painting. And finally, in the two images of King Gagik on the eastern facade (in the feast scene) and on the western facade (in the ktitor composition), we can see an imitation of the image of the Sasanian shahinshah, which was also present among Islamic rulers. The latter was primarily in Gagik's crown, with a pearl diadem and paired wings, in clothes with pictures of birds in medallions and in the oriental pose of the feasting lord³⁸, which were perceived as quotations from the legendary Sasanian past³⁹.

On the Akhtamar church, there are also a number of parallels in the décor elements, in particular in the principle of a wide ornamental border, on which the figures of the main story frieze «stand» (fig. 8). It echoes the construction of plaster décor with figurative scenes in the interior of the hall of the prince's residence at Dastakert in Bandian (Khorasan) of the second half of the 6th-early 7th centuries, where

the figures of people are placed on an ornamental frame of half-palmettes⁴⁰. The motif of the Tree of Life in the design of the church windows also echoes the images on Sasanian silver utensils, etc.

Some compositions with equal crosses on the facades of churches of the 10th-11th centuries (Ani school, etc.) are made according to the compositional principles and styles of square plaster plates of the Sasanian period. A relief plate on the facade of the early 10th-century church in Gdvenvank with a cross and palmettes between wings enclosed in a medallion of pearls is remarkable (fig. 9). The motif, as well as trefoils in the corners of the square, is typical for Sasanid plaster of the same size with images of ancestral symbols, heads of sacral animals (fig. 10), etc⁴¹.

The theme palmette was widely spread in the 10th-11th centuries. In addition to several examples in the churches and khachkars of Ani, remarkable is the decoration of bases and columns in the churches of Tayk, which belonged to the Georgian church at that time, but in their composition and details represented the continuation of the Armenian archi-

37 Mikayelyan, *Story of Jonah* 193-199.

38 Der Nersessian, *Aght'amar* 27.

39 Gagik Artsruni's ambitious plans to rule the Armenian kingdom led to his alliance with the emir of Atropatena Yusuf against the Bagratids. As a result Gagik received the royal crown in 908, but soon he started the struggle against the

Arabs together with the kings Ashot II Yerkat and his brother Abas Bagratuni. (Vardanyan, *Vasparakan* 85-90).

40 Callieri, *Architecture* 54-55. 120-125 figs 62-67.

41 Ayazi/Miri, *Stucco* 25-27.



Fig. 9 Gdvenvank Monastery, early-10th-century church: relief with cross on the facade. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

tectural tradition. There are interesting examples of palmettes on the base of the pillar of Ishkhan (1027) (fig. 11), which itself is very similar to the base of the palace in Kish⁴², and one of the carved columns of the southern gallery of the cathedral in Oshk-vank (963-973). It was during this period, at the time of the heyday of the Bagratid era, when the architectural forms entirely covered in ornaments emerged.

Simultaneously, both Tayk and Ani see the emergence of wide window frames that provide an opportunity to cover them with carpet ornaments of various motifs. The ornament also covers the squinches of facade niches, magnificent examples of which are present in the cathedral of Ani (fig. 12).



The curved decoration of the ceilings of the first Armenian narthex, the so-called zhamatun of the Horomos Monastery⁴³, again reflects presumably Sasanian sources. The sophisticated flat ceilings, octopartite vaults and the central octagonal tent cover this huge multicolumned hall. In the central zone, above the square base of the cornice, a transitional zone on squinches and a tent were constructed. The squinches are conical in shape; they are formed like seashells due to fan-shaped cannelations. The huge trapezoidal stone panels of the roof are placed directly onto the cornice. These high, tight-fitting blocks are covered with ornaments and reliefs; they form a tall pyramid, the top of which is completed with a profiled cornice. An octagonal oculus is used as a base of the high octagonal rotunda that can barely be seen from below (figs 13-14).

The upper third of the pyramid is illuminated especially brightly. It is marked with a separate type of ornament – a row of vertical floral motifs; there are four on each facet. The main, lower zone of slabs is quite simply framed with balls or beads on the carved background. The eastern axial slab includes a multfigured composition. The closest diagonal slabs include khachkars – ornamental crosses, which in the Armenian tradition were usually installed for the sake of recalling the promise of salvation inherent in the Crucifixion, without,

42 Baltrušaitis/Poppe, Sasanian stucco fig. 187c.

43 The last studies of the building are: Kazaryan, Zhamatun, especially 5-6. – Kazaryan, Architecture of Horomos, especially 137f. – Vardanyan, Žamatun. – Vardanyan, Sculpted Dome.

Fig. 10 Teppeh Hesar – Damghan, Sasanian stucco plaque with head of boar, 5th-6th centuries. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).



Fig. 11 Ishkhan Cathedral (reconstr. in 1027): base of the pillar. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).



Fig. 12 Ani, Cathedral, southern facade: squinch of the niche. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).



Fig. 13 Horomos Monastery, zhamatun (1038): central tent. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).



Fig. 14 Horomos Monastery, zhamatun (1038): one of the flat ceilings. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

however, showing the image of Christ that is implied in these symbolic representations. On the north-western slab, there is an image of the Tree of Life. Other slabs are decorated with a carpet ornament of pseudo-meander (or swastika). This ornament and the flourishing crosses are also present in the central tent and on the flat ceilings of the zhamatun.

The tent-like structure of the pointed roof also demonstrates new forms of decoration. Its total ornamentation of the decorative surface, which previously had not occurred in Armenian architecture, originated from the East. In this connection, we need to recall the art of Iran, first of all, where the idea of covering surfaces with ornaments had

been nurtured. The increase of architectural production in Iran in the late 10th and the early 11th centuries in the context of the so-called brick style had an impact on the builders of the monument at Horomos, where the architect's familiarity with eastern trends is apparent. Neither the ornamentation of the wide surfaces of the ceilings, nor their counterposition to the walls was presented elsewhere than in the zhamatun. Also, those peculiarities remained unusual for the architecture of Armenian churches, which have smooth vaults and a ductile transition leading from them to the walls. Therefore, the concept of the zhamatun was quite different to that of a church, and we focus our search for the roots of the zha-



Fig. 15 Ani, Gagkashen Church (ca. 1001): carved detail. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

matun's decoration in a particular functional significance of that very monument.

The framing of each relief or ornamental composition with strings of round beads again makes us recall the representative Sasanid compositions inscribed in a ring of beads. It is also difficult to disregard the idea of a possible connection between wide fields of pseudo-meanders or swastikas. Its earlier examples are present in Ani Cathedral and the Gagkashen Church in Ani, from about 1001 (fig. 15); its later representations are in the numerous khachkars (fig. 16) and on the window frame of the Church of Tsaghats Kar (1041) with similar Sasanian plaster scenes. And, of course, on the facets of the tent the theme of the Tree of Life is explicit⁴⁴, which had unique interpretations not only in the art of Iran but also in Armenia from the times of the Urartu kingdom (relief from Adilgevaz or Erebuni murals) and the original interpretation in the 7th-century relief in the cathedral in Mren.

However, it is necessary to pay attention to the carpet nature of ornamentation on the ceilings of Hořomos, the origins of which appear in Sasanid architecture, in its relief décor. This method was not and did not become very characteristic of Armenian architecture as it happened, for example, in Iranian architecture of the Islamic era. However, the Armenian architects and clients, who ordered the structures, knew and mastered it, occasionally applying it in those cases when the technique itself helped express some special idea, as we see in the Hořomos zhamatun and the zhamatuns of the 12th-13th centuries that are genetically related to it.

Another sphere in which the Armenian masters skillfully used the technique of carpet decoration and decoration with ornamental frames was the art of the khachkar, which was actively developed by the end of the Bagratid era. The examples of khachkars on the Oromos tent are striking examples of the heyday of this art, which started in the 12th century and never faded throughout the Middle Ages.

Finally, the first half of the 11th century is probably the period in which the tradition of decorating the frontal walls of raised altars in Armenian churches was initiated. The most striking examples are the walls of the raised altars in the Church of St Hovhannes of the Hořomos Monastery (1038)⁴⁵ and the main church of Marmashen (1029) (fig. 17). Ornamented plates of these walls are genetically associated with the early Christian plates of the altar rail, but only relatively. In the cells of carpet ornamentation covering the walls of the 11th-century raised altars, along with the development of traditional lattice, rosettes and crosses, there are also interpretations of the so-called arabesques, the origins of which can be seen not only in the fascinating lattice everywhere in the East and primarily the Muslim world, but also in the Sasanian art that preceded it (a silver plate from the Berlin Museum, ornaments on vessels and on plasterwork).



Fig. 16 Sanahin Monastery: fragment of the khachkar of the 11th century. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

The influence of Iranian art on the architecture of medieval Armenia continued in the 12th-14th centuries, especially in the field of decorative art, and in certain periods it was manifested in the tendency of a greater refinement of ornamentation using smaller plants and geometric arabesques (Amaghu Noravank, 1339; Yeghvard, 1328). At the heart of this type of décor lays the late Sasanian stucco, which later extended throughout the Islamic world. In the Armenian monuments of the 10th-11th centuries, there was mainly thematic and stylistic influence of plastered decorations on stone carving. The very masonry technique used by Armenian masters gave rise to the creative interpretations of the so-called carpet pattern and determined the independent artistic direction of the architectural décor in Armenia.

At the same time, Armenian architects during the whole medieval period preserved their traditional orientation to classical tectonic with smooth surfaces and with special places for ornamental friezes and fields. It was this tradition which was inherited by the architects of the Seljuks' constructions in Eastern Anatolia – constructions built of stone and rubble core.

44 Vardanyan, *Sculpted Dome* 249.

45 Known from measurement drawings by Toros Toramanian, see: Baladian/Thierry, *Le couvent* pls 29-38.



Fig. 17 Marmashen Monastery, main church (1029): fragment of the wall of the altar's elevation. – (Photo A. Kazaryan / L. Mikayelyan).

Acknowledgements

This study has been conducted with the support of A. Kazaryan's research by the Programme of Fundamental Research of the Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction

Sciences and of the Ministry of Construction of the Russian Federation, no. 1.2.1.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Architektonische Verzierungen armenischer Kirchen des 7. und 11.-11. Jahrhunderts und ihre möglichen sasanidischen Wurzeln

Vor einem Jahrhundert war Josef Strzygowski der Ansicht, dass die armenische Architektur eine Übergangsrolle zwischen den iranischen Kuppelstrukturen und den byzantinischen Konstruktionen der justinianischen Epoche (6. Jahrhundert) spielte. Heutzutage erfordern einige Punkte dieser fast vergessenen Theorie eine Revision und weitere Überlegungen. Aber einige Ideen des berühmten Gelehrten verdienen unsere Aufmerksamkeit. Insbesondere ist es wichtig, die Untersuchung der wahrscheinlichen sasanidischen Herkunft einiger dekorativer Motive und Reliefbilder der mittelalterlichen armenischen Architektur unter Berücksichtigung ihrer neuen Bedeutung im Kontext der christlichen Kultur zu vertiefen. Der Zweck dieser Studie ist es, die Auswirkungen der sasanidischen Elemente auf das Dekorationssystem der armenischen Kirchen des 7. und 10.-11. Jahrhunderts zu verstehen, den Perioden der höchsten Entwicklung der nationalen Architektur, in denen die engsten Beziehungen zur byzantinischen Tradition aufgezeigt wurden. Gleichzeitig interpretierte die armenische Architektur sowohl die griechisch-römischen als auch einige lokale architektonische Besonderheiten. Die

Verzierung der Kuppeln im Inneren der armenischen Kirchen aus dem 7. Jahrhundert und die ordnungsgemäßen blinden Arkaden der Fassaden der Denkmäler der Spätantike und der Bagratidenzeit lassen sasanidische ikonografische Ursprünge erkennen. Auch einige Ornamente und eine Reihe von Fabelwesen auf den Reliefs und andere Merkmale, wie die teppichartig geschwungenen Decken des Zhamatun (Vorkirche) des Hořomos-Klosters, spiegeln die künstlerischen Eigenschaften der sasanidischen und frühislamischen iranischen Architektur wider.

Architectural Decorations of Armenian Churches of the 7th and the 10th-11th Centuries and Their Presumably Sasanian Sources

A century ago, Josef Strzygowski considered that Armenian architecture played a transitional role between Iranian domed structures and Byzantine constructions of the Justinian epoch (6th century). Nowadays, some points of that almost forgotten theory require revision and further consideration. But several ideas of the famous scholar deserve our attention. In particular, it is important to deepen the study of the probable Sasanian origins of some decorative motives and relief images of medieval Armenian architecture taking into consideration their new meaning in the context of Christian culture. The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of the Sasanian elements in the decoration system of Armenian churches of the 7th and the 10th-11th centuries, the periods of the highest development of national architecture, when it revealed the closest relationships with the Byzantine tradition. At the same time Armenian architecture interpreted both the Graeco-Roman and several local architectural peculiarities. The decoration of the domes in the interior of the 7th-century Armenian churches and the order-like blind arcades of the facades of the monuments of the Late Antique and Bagratid periods reveal Sasanian iconographic origins. Also, some ornaments and a range of mythical creatures on the reliefs and other features, such as the carpet-like curved ceilings of the zhamatun (narthex) of the Horomos monastery, reflect the artistic characteristics of the Sasanian and early Islamic Iranian architecture.

Décors architectoniques des églises arméniennes du 7^e et des 10^e/11^e siècles et leurs racines sassanides éventuelles

Josef Strzygowski pensait il y a un siècle que l'architecture arménienne jouait un rôle de transition entre les structures à coupole iraniennes et les constructions byzantines de l'époque justinienne (6^e siècle). Actuellement, certains points de cette théorie presque oubliée exigent une révision et de plus amples réflexions. Mais certaines idées de cet érudit célèbre méritent notre attention. Il importe en particulier d'approfondir l'étude de l'origine probablement sassanide de quelques motifs décoratifs et de reliefs de l'architecture médiévale arménienne en tenant compte de leur nouvelle signification en contexte culturel chrétien. Le but de cette étude est de comprendre l'impact des éléments sassanides sur le système décoratif des églises arméniennes du 7^e et des 10^e/11^e siècles, apogées de l'architecture nationale, pour les quelles on a pu identifier les liens les plus étroits avec la tradition byzantine. L'architecture arménienne exprimait à la fois les caractéristique gréco-romaines et certaines particularités locales. Le décor des coupoles à l'intérieur des églises arméniennes du 7^e siècle et les arcades aveugles usuelles des façades des monuments de l'Antiquité tardive et des Bagratides trahissent des origines iconographiques sassanides. Quelques ornements et une série de créatures mythiques sur les reliefs, ainsi que d'autres particularités telles que les plafonds du zhamatun (sorte de narthex) de Horomos décorés, comme des tapis, d'éléments curvilignes, reflètent également des caractéristiques artistiques de l'architecture iranienne des époques sassanide et proto-islamique.

Traduction: Y. Gautier