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Visual Cultures and Art History

**On the road to Etchmiadzin: The Mother Church,
St. Hripsime, St. Gayane, Shoghakat**

Master's thesis

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I hereby confirm that I have worked on the thesis on my own and that no part of it has been taken from others unless specifically cited within the text.

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1. Introduction

This thesis is dedicated to the three churches and the Cathedral located in the Armenian city of Etchmiadzin. The area of main focus will be the period from the fourth to the seventh centuries. Writing a study on the following topic is difficult for many reasons. The biggest challenge lies in the lack of availability of archeological materials as well as the language barrier since most of the crucial texts are in Armenian. I was able to obtain many of them, but my own translation many times was not satisfactory for the precise and correct understanding of the texts.

The majority of scholars studied the monuments based on the architectural description and visual similarities with the other church buildings constructed around the same time. The last excavations that were done on the site of the Cathedral are from the years 1955-56 and 59, done by Armenian architect Alexander Sahinyan. This research opened new ways for historians to date the Mother Church. But unfortunately, since then, no other work has been done to check the accuracy of the findings or eventually add to them. The new archeological material is, therefore, more than needed to apprehend better the remnants of previous temples that were found under the grounds of the Cathedral and the neighboring churches.

The thesis is divided into four main parts. First, I will present the *status quaestionis* on Etchmiadzin and the three churches. This chapter is for better structure divided into several subchapters. It should be noted that due to the number of existing publications about the four monuments, it is not a complete report of things that were ever written since that would be impossible at this research level.

In the second part, I will interpret the historical context of each monument, describe the architecture, and date the constructions accordingly.

The third part will deal with the city as one compact entity. I will refer to the earliest available chronicles that are linked to the foundation of the Cathedral and the surrounding area. In the same chapter, I will try to reconstruct the view of the first

settlements and the role of the urban area during the Christianization of the country. In the last part, I will aim for the possible reconstruction of the city since its foundation, based on the existing archeological research from 1930 and topographical plans.

Finally, the last chapter will explore the churches' initial function and the main reasons for their construction. The main question will be the motive for their specific placement and the overall connection to the city during the period of the seventh century when they were constructed. I will try to specify the political and religious imperative of the beginning of the fifth century in the context of the creation of "The New Jerusalem" in Armenia.

2. State of Research

Putting together the existing studies on the city of Etchmiadzin and its surrounding churches was a challenging task. It was primarily due to a language barrier since the older written sources often existed only in the old Armenian language. Certain documents concerned with the excavations were also unfortunately impossible to obtain for us at the moment.¹

The studies on the Armenian architecture of Etchmiadzin and its urbanism are regrettably still limited. Some important monuments have been the subject of monographs, but the remaining part is known to us only through a few fragments. New excavations, surveys, studies, and publications are still more than necessary to grasp the nature of this unique site.

We have divided this chapter into several subchapters for a better thesis structure. Some publications and their critiques are described in more detail to understand better how the scholarship changed and developed. Although we mentioned specific reports and books, more sources are listed and cited later in the work. For the complete list of bibliography used, see the end of this thesis.

It should be said that this is not a complete analysis of all the scholars who have worked on the architecture and urbanism of Etchmiadzin since that would hardly be possible given the volume of publications on the subject. Still, it might seem that list of the literature sources and authors presented in this chapter is broader than required. However, the aim was to assemble all necessary, exemplary works and information on the city and its temples. The goal is to understand the development better, capture the essence of the scholarship, and show the parts that are still being neglected when it comes to a country where Christianity was born and where people gather even nowadays to worship the legendary martyrs buried in the churches. It is not hard to notice when

¹ The city of Etchmiadzin or Vagharshapat as it is also officially called, is referred to as “Etchmiadzin” and “Vagharshapat” throughout this thesis as such a transliteration of the name often appears in the English bibliography. Nevertheless, it is possible to find other variations of the names in foreign literature, such as Echmiadzin, Ejmiatsin, Egmiacin, and others.

studying the monuments that in the literature, the churches and the city are usually treated separately and primarily represented in a general way focusing on the architectural description. We hope this thesis will have a little impact on changing that.

2.1 Etchmiadzin

The analysis of the sources on the city of Etchmiadzin and its churches has a long history. Returning to the fifth century, I will present the publications and their editions chronologically based on their relevance to our research.

A) The Early Sources

The earliest document on the existence of the churches of Saint Gayane and Saint Hripsime churches can be found in Yovhannes Drasxanakertc'i's *History of Armenia* (10th century).² The events and circumstances behind the building and later reconstruction of the temples were illustrated on a dramatic historical background where the Chalcedonian heresy and a fight for power were mixing the cards of the future catholicoi.³

Drasxanakertc'i wrote that during that time, the chosen Catholicos Komitas (615-628) adorned the formerly dark and small structure of Saint Hripsime's with a new splendid and elegant temple being more worthy of its role as a martyrion. He also uncovered the saint's relics, which became a source of spiritual consolation for all the Armenians. After the church's completion, he sealed the coffin with the relics and stored them inside. Komitas also stood behind the decision to dismount the wooden roof of the dome of the Cathedral and rebuild it with polished stones.⁴

² Yovhannes Drasxanakertc'i, *History of Armenia*, Translation and Commentary by Rev. Krikor H. Maksoudian, Scholars Press Atlanta, Georgia 1987.

Maksoudian translated the text to English based mostly on the 1965 Tiflis edition and the readings of the existing manuscripts, which have been compared with the 1867 Jerusalem edition of the text. He also included the preface, the first twenty-three chapters, and the epilogue of the *History*, which were omitted in the 1965 Tiflis edition. Maksoudian based the translation of these sections on the 1867 Jerusalem and 1853 Moscow (reprinted in Tiflis in 1912) editions.

³ A catholicos (plural: catholicoi) is the head of the Armenian Apostolic church.

⁴ Drasxanakertc'i 1987, p. 97.

Later, the author introduced another important figure, the Patriarch Ezr (630-641), who demolished an unsuitable martyrion of Saint Gayane and built a larger and more magnificent one. Outside, he situated a residence area designated for the serving priests.⁵

During the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, the territory of Armenia was repressed by several attacks and invasions by the Turco-Mongols. The most critical were invasions of the Seljuks in the second half of the eleventh century, of the Khwarazmians (1225-1230), and of the Mongols (1223-1247).⁶

As a result, Etchmiadzin fell into a deep state of neglect and decay. We have written evidence of this in the form of a poem from the year 1300, written by archbishop Stepanos Orbelian (1250-1303).⁷ It is a lamentation on behalf of the Cathedral. It is portrayed as a mourning woman remembering its former glory and begging the Armenians to return to their homeland to restore and repopulate it.⁸

“...They proceeded to the land of Araman.
And filled the plain of Ararat.
They reached Armenia’s new city,
Formerly known as Vardges.

Vagharsh, the Arshakuni king,
Enlarged the city’s walls;
Therein he established his court,
And named it after himself.”

...

“It is I, it is I Etchmiadzin,
The King born of me, the Virgin;”

...

⁵ Drasxanakerc’i 1987, p. 100.

⁶ Hovannisian, R., *The Armenian people from ancient to modern times. The dynastic periods: from antiquity to the fourteenth century*, vol. I., New York 1997, p. 241.

⁷ Sanjian, A., Stone, M., E., “Stepanos Orbelian’s ‘Ban bararnakan dimarnabar I dimats Vagharshapatu surb katoghikein’” (Allegorical prosopopoeia on the holy cathedral at Vagharshapat), trans. Avedis K. Sanjian, in: *Armenian and Biblical Studies*, Michael E. Stone (eds.), Jerusalem 1976.

Unfortunately, I was not able to access the original text in Armenian. Therefore, I relied on the translation by Sanjian.

See also: Grigorian, G. M., “Ստեփանոս Օրբելյան” [Stepanos Orbelian in Armenian], in: *Պատմա-փիլոսոփիական հանդես* [Historical and Philosophical Journal, in Armenian], no. 4, Yerevan 1976, pp. 155-164.

⁸ Hacikyan, A., J., et al., *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the sixth to the eighteenth century, vol. II*, Detroit 2002, p. 536.

“Of yore I was like Heaven,
But now levelled with the ground;
Of yore I was like the brilliant sun,
But now in total darkness.”

...

“And those, who dance around me,
Are my erstwhile daughters.
They had been given away as brides
To all the churches of Armenia.”

...

“Countless troops were beside me,
As befits a monarch.
Ritual song resounded within me,
Like the celestial bodies on high.

At the annual feasts there assembled
Countless people around me;
Rivers of wisdom flowed forth from me,
Like the Tigris and Euphrates.”

...

“Where the deacons of my see?
Where the choristers of my temple?
Where the readers at the vespers?
Where the psalmists who used to sing?

Where the purple garments,
Transparent veils and purple linen?
Where the silken cloths and muslin,
As well as the Indian blue?

Where are the fine linen in the arcades,
Woven with gold and adorned with pearls?
Where the holy books and their ribbons?
Where the noble diadems

That were wrought with pure gold,
And studded with precious gems,
With rubies as well as sapphires,
With red hyacinth and cornelian?

Where the armlets for my arms,
And the anklets for my legs?
Where the songs of the ministrants?
Where the fragrance of the sweet smell?

Where the burning lanterns,
That were like the stars in heaven?
Where the sacrifices for the great mystery

That were offered within me constantly?”

...

“May they say: Alas, you old city,
The abode and seat of the Divinity,
How you became so lowly.
Like the cell of the gardener.

The hedges of the garden and vineyard have crumbled,
The fens of the swine have been defiled.
In place of the celestial hosts,
Satan’s angels dance around you.”⁹

Similar poems and textual documents on the churches are very valuable sources of information for historians. Many times, when there was no possibility of investigating the churches in situ, scholars relied on these reports to have a better idea of historical events and were able to reconstruct the appearance of the buildings.

Due to the Mongol invasion, the historical testimonies receded in its amount.¹⁰ From the fourteenth century, the written evidence of the tragic events has survived mainly thanks to short chronicles and records of Armenian manuscripts.¹¹

B) On the road to Etchmiadzin

Centuries later, an Armenian historian and clergyman known as Arakel Davrizhetsi or Arakel of Tabriz (1591-1670) wrote the *Book of Stories*.¹² The first Armenian edition of the book was published in 1669 in Amsterdam and later translated into Russian by L. A. Khanlaryan.¹³ Due to the author’s vivid description of the country’s nature, monuments, and particularly the narration of the socio-political events, it is one of the most outstanding historical works of that time. Touching on the topic of the churches of Saint Gayane and Saint Hripsime, the author referred to them as inactive and

⁹ Hacikyan, A., J., et al., *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the sixth to the eighteenth century, vol. II*, Detroit 2002, pp. 537-551.

¹⁰ For more information about the Mongol tribes in Armenia, see Bayarsaikhan, D., *The Mongols and the Armenians (1220-1335)*, Boston 2011.

¹¹ Khanlaryan, L. A., *Արակել Դավրիժեցի «Книга историй»* [Arakel Davrizhetsi “Book of Stories”, in Russian] Moscow 1978, npp. Online at: [L.A. Khanlaryan - Arakel Davrizhetsi and his "Book of Stories" \(armenianhouse.org\)](http://L.A.Khanlaryan-Arakel-Davrzhetsi-and-his-Book-of-Stories-armenianhouse.org). For more information about Armenian manuscripts see: Sanjian, A., K., *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301-1480*, Massachusetts 1969.

¹² Davrizhetsi, A., *Պատմություն* [History, in Armenian], Amsterdam 1669.

¹³ Khanlaryan 1978, npp. Online at: [Արակել Դավրիժեցի - Книга Историй \(armenianhouse.org\)](http://Արակել-Դավրիժեցի-Книга-Историй-armenianhouse.org).

dilapidated. He stressed the state of preservation and the restoration of the crypts and the presence of the relics at the site. In connection to the life in the convent, he mentioned several religious leaders, such as Catholicos Movses Syunetsi (1629-1632), who stood behind the restoration of Etchmiadzin Cathedral in the first half of the seventeenth century and who actively strengthened the spiritual activity of the whole country.¹⁴

All the Caucasian regions became known to the West thanks to many records of voyagers from England, France, and Germany. The Armenian bibliography has been enriched thanks to such authors, notably from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. The city of Etchmiadzin, especially the Cathedral and the surrounding churches, was often a subject of interest for pilgrims and travelers who visited Armenia.

In the seventeenth century, the city and the churches were first mentioned in the travel diary by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689), published in two volumes.¹⁵ As a son of a Parisian geographer, Tavernier executed not one but six long-distance journeys to Turkey, Persia, and India between the years 1631-1668. More than specific architectural data, he provides information about the church service with a little insight into the monastery's life.¹⁶

“The first place worthy of being noticed on entering Persia through Armenia is that which is called ‘The Three Churches’ three leagues from Erivan, and these are the three monasteries at some distance from each other. The largest and the most beautiful is the residence of the Great Patriarch of Armenians; there is another one in the south which is distant from the first one only a musket range;

¹⁴ Baraničová, M., *Saint Gayane Church*, B.A. thesis (Masaryk University, supervisor: Ivan Foletti), Brno 2020, p. 5.

For the list of Armenian Catholicoi, see Iskandar, A. J., *La Nouvelle Cilicie: Les Arméniennes du Liban*, Antelias 1999, pp. 118-121.

¹⁵ Tavernier, J., B., *Les six voyages de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier...: qui'il a fait en Turquie, en Perse, et aux Indes..*, vol. I., Paris 1676, pp. 25-32.

¹⁶ For the first English translation of the book, see Tavernier, J., B., *The six voyages of John Baptista Tavernier*, trans. Phillips, J., London 1678, pp. 10-13. By the year 1712, the book was reprinted and translated also into French, German, Dutch, and Italian.

and a third at a quarter of a place beyond towards the east, which is a monastery for girls. The Armenians call this place Egmiacin....”¹⁷

Interesting in this case is the name by which Tavernier calls the city – the place of “the Three Churches” and the fact that the author did not mention the existence of the Shoghakat church. The short narration of the temples and their origin was supported by the illustration of the complex depicting the main Cathedral and surrounding court area flanked by the high walls and shrines outside the borders.¹⁸

Such accounts are especially nowadays extremely valuable for scholars and historians. Sometimes, they provide only surviving descriptions of lost medieval buildings. In others, they portray the state of the monuments before modern restorations.

Such an example can be found illustrated in the engraving of Etchmiadzin by French traveler John Chardin (1643-1713) on the pages of his book “Journal du voyage du Chevalier Chardin en Pèrse & aux Indes orientales qui contient le voyage de Paris à Ispahan par la Mer Noire & par les Colchide”.¹⁹ In years after, Chardin’s work was cited many times and taken as an exemplary travelogue. In addition to depicting the main Cathedral, he also included an early view of the churches of Hripsime and Gayane [FIG. 1]. The Cathedral was, according to his words massive and dark building with no ornaments of sculpture or painting in its interior. On the eastern side of the church are described the three chapels.

The one in the middle is the largest and has a well-decorated stone altar. Those on the sides have no altar, one serving as a sacristy, the other as a treasury. Inside, the monks store several beautiful crosses, chalices, and candlesticks made of silver and gold. The main and the most treasured relic of the Cathedral are allegedly the remains of Saint Hripsime’s arm and a thigh of Saint Gayane. Among other relics is an arm of Saint

¹⁷ *"Le premier lieu digne d'être remarqué en entrant en Perse par l'Armenie est celui qu'on appelle "les trois Eglises" à trois lieux d'Erivan, & ce font trois Monasteres a quelque distance les uns des autres. Le plus grand & le plus beau est la résidence du grand Patriarche des Armeniens; il y en a un autre au midi qui n'est éloigné du premier que d'une portée de mousquet; & un troisième à un quart de lieu delà vers le levant, qui est un Monastere de filles. Les Armeniens appellent ce lieu-là Egmiacin..."* Quoted from Tavernier 1676, p. 25. Translation to English was made by the author.

¹⁸ For the illustration, see: Tavernier 1676, chapt. III., np.

¹⁹ Chardin, J., *Journal du voyage du Chevalier Chardin en Pèrse & aux Indes orientales qui contient le voyage de Paris à Ispahan par la Mer Noire & par les Colchide*, Amsterdam 1686, pp. 308-312.

Gregory the Illuminator, a finger of Saint Peter, and the two fingers of Saint John the Baptist.²⁰

While present-day scholars sometimes cast these writers as naive amateurs, as Maranci noted, these travelers often show surprising attentiveness and critical insight.²¹

Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708) undertook the journey to the Etchmiadzin in July 1718.²² According to the traveler, the complex was called “*Itchmiadzin*” by the Armenians. The Turks called the area – “Utch Kliffé - a place of the Three Churches”, as previously mentioned by Tavernier. Tournefort, in this case, correctly observed that a more proper name would be “a place of Four Churches”, not neglecting the Shoghakat church.²³ Later he characterized the main Cathedral as the Patriarchal Church built in the middle of the Great Court consecrated to Saint Gregory the Illuminator, where many reliquaries are kept.

“The building is solid and of fine-hewn stone; the pillars and arches are thick. But the whole is dark and close, not well illuminated. At one end are three chapels, of which the middle one only is furnished with an altar, the others serving for a vestry and a treasury.”²⁴

The author later compares the look of the churches and the different cultural backgrounds of Persians and Turks. In another passage, he mentioned the two churches – Saint Gayane on the right of the convent and Saint Hripsime on the left. They were without a monastery and had gone to ruin at the time of his visit. The service has not been performed in a long time. The author does not forget to tell the legendary story of the

²⁰ Chardin 1686, p. 309.

²¹ Maranci, Ch., *Medieval Armenian Architecture: Construction of Race and Nation*, Leuven 2001, p. 8. For a list of European travelers visiting Armenia’s other regions, see also: Maranci, Ch., “Early European Travelers and Their Contributions to the Study of Armenian Architecture” in: *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, vol. 10 (2000), p. 7.

²² Tournefort, J., P., *A voyage into the Levant [Relation d’un voyage du Levant]*, vol. II, London 1718, pp. 248-251.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

virgins martyred, at the beginning of the fourth century, by King Tiridates and buried at the site of the churches.²⁵

A century later, we have another short report of the Etchmiadzin monastery from James Morier's (1780-1846) second journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor to Constantinople.²⁶ The content and stylistic of his writing are very similar to those of Tournefort and Tavernier.²⁷ He also compared his impressions of the city and the Cathedral's state with Chardin's reports.²⁸ Other than Chardin, he describes, presumably at that time, a freshly obtained relic of the Holy Lance of Keghart, kept in Etchmiadzin. The remnant is said to be the head of the famous spear with which the Roman soldier pierced the side of Jesus Christ during the Crucifixion.²⁹

A few years later, a Scottish artist Robert Ker Porter (1777-1842), also went to see the famous churches. The whole experience from the visit is described in both volumes of his book. In the first volume, Porter opened the narration by saying that his welcome by the Patriarch and the whole stay was the kindest possible. The first monument he looked at closely after walking around the city was the Cathedral, founded in 304 AD by Saint Gregory, as were the churches in its vicinity.³⁰ In the second book, he described the area of Etchmiadzin as the sole habitable remains of an enormous city called Valarshapat, which, in old times, surrounded the great metropolitan establishment for many miles. He focused more on the narration of the monastery life and the movement around the city rather than detailed descriptions of the architecture.³¹ Nevertheless, even when some of these commentaries might seem irrelevant, they are valuable sources for readers to imagine the whole look of the city and its area at that time.

Before his visit, Porter knew the Cathedral mainly from the writings of Chardin, which were very accurate to the image he saw. He complained that the architecture was

²⁵ Ibidem, pp. 250-251.

²⁶ Morier, J., *A second journey through Persia, Armenia and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, between the year 1810 and 1816*, London 1818, pp. 323-325.

²⁷ See note 15.

²⁸ See note 22.

²⁹ Morier 1818, p. 325.

Tavernier also drew an illustration of the lance in his diaries. See: Tavernier 1676, np.

³⁰ Porter, R., K., *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia &c. &c.* vol. I., London 1821, pp. 186-191.

³¹ Porter, R., K., *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia &c. &c.* vol. II., London 1821, pp. 634-638

of a rude character when compared with even the roughest styles of Gothic churches that may be seen in England.³² In his words, much labor, in the shape of lean and carved ornaments, in bad taste, has been wasted on the ponderous vestibule, which was clearly of a later date than the cathedral itself. On entering the sacred building, he found it awfully dark and gloomy, with ill-drawn and worse-colored legends of saints painted on the walls and black transcripts of devout Armenian sentences.³³ The holy relict being no longer profitable merchandise, remained untouched; and they existed much in the same state as when Chardin described them.³⁴ His next steps lead to the church of Saint Gayane. To Porter's amusement, the company of monks assured him the nun was a Briton. The third stop was about two miles northwest, in the church dedicated to Saint Hripsime, where her skull and the arm of Saint Gregory were kept in a silver case. The spearhead of Calvary, still more eminently cherished than these relics, is brought out with them to be held forth to the people in cases of any great public procession. Porter missed the sight of the spear from a circumstance of this kind.³⁵

British general Sir Richard Wilbraham (1811-1900) went on a trip to Etchmiadzin's convent on 26th August 1837 and later wrote about his adventures in *Travels in the Transcaucasian Provinces of Russia and along the Southern Shore of the Lakes of Van and Urumiah*.³⁶ In his words, Etchmiadzin consisted of inelegant architecture – several distinct churches, each surrounded by a high wall, flanked by circular towers, which formed the shape of a cross.³⁷ He also noted the Virgin Mary festival, which took place in the city. During the mass in the Cathedral, he had the opportunity to observe the inner fresco decoration of the Cathedral and many relics displayed that day. Wilbraham said the most remarkable one was the supposed Noah's ark fragment.³⁸

³² Porter 1821, vol. I, p. 187.

³³ Ibidem, p. 188.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 189.

³⁵ Porter, 1821, vol. II, p. 635.

³⁶ Wilbraham, R., *Travels in the Transcaucasian Provinces of Russia and along the Southern Shore of the Lakes of Van and Urumiah, in the Autumn and Winter of 1837*, London 1839.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 92.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 96.

Eugène Boré (1809-1878), who visited the Etchmiadzin Cathedral in 1838 and had the opportunity to study the monuments, mentioned two Greek inscriptions on the outside of the chancel.³⁹ The writing of which is said to point back to the first centuries of the Christian era. On one tablet are the prayers with the names of the deceased; on the other, Paul and Thecla are named. According to Boré, the inscriptions indicate that Christianity existed in these parts before the arrival of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Besides, he considered that the Greek language was being used in the liturgy alongside Syriac, which some believed was the only one used at that time.⁴⁰

A significant change in the history of scholarship in Armenian architecture came with a Swiss historian Frédéric Dubois de Montpéroux (1798-1849), who traveled around the Caucasus in 1833-34. The outcome of his memorable journey was published as a five-volume book *Voyage Autour du Caucase*.⁴¹ The narration of his quest started in Etchmiadzin, where he stated that the churches of Saint Gayane and Hripsime became models for several other Armenian buildings. Dubois was surprised to find the city still standing, and his detailed inspection of the monastery and the surrounding churches led him to theorize further about their original appearance. His work is appreciated notably for its illustrations. He left behind a drawing of the hypothetical reconstruction of the Cathedral, where he proposed his observations and made changes to the look of the building. Even though the reconstruction is somewhat problematic, it is still considered seriously in discussions of its initial phase.⁴² Some of his questionable conclusions could be the repeating references to Egyptian architecture or the wrong dating of Saint Hripsime church, which Dubois dated three centuries earlier than its original foundation in the seventh century.⁴³ His scholarly accomplishments were not quite appreciated in the past. An example of an inaccurate judgment of Dubois is a note from Ulrich Bock from 1983,

³⁹ Boré, E., *Correspondance et mémoires d'un voyageur en Orient*, Paris, 1840, p. 41.

⁴⁰ For commentary about Boré's findings in the Cathedral, see: Strzygowski, J., *Das Etschmiadzin-Evangelium: Beiträge zur Geschichte der armenischen, ravennnatischen und syro-ägyptischen Kunst*, Wien 1891, p. 5.

⁴¹ Dubois de Montpéroux, F., *Voyage Autour du Caucase chez les Tcherkesses et les Abkhases, en Colchide, en Géorgie, en Arménie et en Crimée; avec un atlas géographique pittoresque, archéologique, géologique, etc.*, 5 vols. Paris and Neuchâtel 1839-43.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

who wrote about Dubois' inability to make a critical analysis of the material,⁴⁴ and Ramadze Mepisashvili, who concluded that the historian confused Georgian and Byzantine art and treated Armenian art only as "an afterthought".⁴⁵ Despite lacking a modern perspective, Dubois' narrative remains one of the most influential nineteenth-century Western works on Armenian architecture. Opposed to common scholarly opinion, the historian did not view Armenian architecture as a hybrid style or a part of Byzantine architecture. As a matter of choice, he judged it as an indigenous tradition.⁴⁶

Another valuable addition to the Armenian travelogues was done by Marie-Félicité Brosset (1802- 1880).⁴⁷ The reports from the 40 days he spent in Etchmiadzin and later in the city of Ani during his winter expedition offered refreshing insight into the history and religion of the country based on a description of the Cathedral and the surrounding churches. His book was partly inspired by the work of Dubois and P. Chakhathounof, who, before him, also pictured the city and the convent in great detail.⁴⁸

In this part, we must mention Viscount James Bryce (1838-1922) and his travelogue *Transcaucasia and Ararat*.⁴⁹ Bryce was an Oxford professor, a historian, a jurist, and a politician. He presented his experiences and opinions as impressions of a traveler who sees the monuments with fresh eyes, giving the reader a unique image of the city and its history.

Even though the stories of the creation of the churches were described vividly, we have to point out the inaccuracy when it comes to the dating of the monuments. The author

⁴⁴ Bock, U., *Die armenische Baukunst: Geschichte und Problematik ihrer Erforschung*, Cologne 1983, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Mepisashvili, R., Zinzadse W., *Die Kunst des alten Georgien*, Leipzig, 1977, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Maranci 2001, pp. 18. See also: Maranci, CH., "Native and 'Foreign' in Armenian Architecture; The Case for a Cross-Cultural Study", *Conference of the College Art Association*, Toronto, February 25-28, 1998.

⁴⁷ Brosset, M. F., *Voyage Archéologique en Transcaucasie, Rapports sur un voyage archéologique dans la Géorgie et dans l'Arménie, exécuté en 1847 – 1848*, vol. 1., Saint Petersburg 1849.

See also: Brosset, M., F., *Catalogue de la bibliothèque d'Edchmiadzin*, Saint Petersburg 1840.

Brosset's work left a large mark on the study of medieval Armenian and Georgian art, but it was the outcome of his Etchmiadzin catalog that is of interest to this thesis, for its publication in 1840 stimulated the interest in medieval Armenian history and culture in more European countries.

Brosset, M., F., *Description d'Etchmiadzin, Résidence du patriarche des arméniens*, *Revue Archéologique*, 15, no. 2 (Oct. 1858, Mar. 1859), pp. 427-437.

⁴⁸ See: Dubois de Montpéroux, 1839-43; Chakhathounof, P., *Description de la résidence patriarcale d'Edchmiadzin et des cinq provinces de l'Ararat*, 2 vols., Etchmiadzin 1842.

⁴⁹ Bryce, J., *Transcaucasia and Ararat: Being Notes of a Vacation Tour in the Autumn of 1876*, London 1878.

complained about how difficult it is to date the buildings since the architectural style in the country varied so little from one century to another that only a practiced and skillful archeologist could undertake to pronounce the date of a building by examining it only. He described the inner architecture and distinctive aura of the churches.⁵⁰ According to Bryce, the Mother Cathedral supposedly contained some bits of a wall as old as the fourth century; the main body of it is attributed to the seventh or eighth. The tall central cupola rises into an octagonal spire, or somewhat conical tower, of the usual Armenian type. It is said to date from the seventh century, though Bryce hesitates to believe it to be anything so old. So, too, the four smaller open towers at the four extremities, the windows, and doors, with their moldings, are all in the traditional style of Armenian building, and probably all modern, the towers of the seventeenth century, the porch of the eighteenth.⁵¹

The author later talks about the city's history connected to pilgrimage. Etchmiadzin was the resort of vast numbers of pilgrims from the surrounding countries and the Armenians scattered through Asia. Still, as Bryce observed during his visit, like almost all the great old shrines, like Santiago, Einsiedeln, St. David's, and Loretto, it has lost this source of wealth. It has also lost the visitors who halted at it as they passed along what was once the great trade route from Trebizond by Erzerum and Erivan to Tavriz and Northern Persia. In his opinion, the city's area was relatively insignificant, with barely any trace of its former greatness. Only one mass of ancient brick buildings marked where there once stood 20,000 houses, the place where Tiridates reigned at the time of the conversion to Christianity. He stated that these Oriental cities, mostly built of unburnt brick and without significant public structures, disappeared fast, leaving only little remains behind. Usually, only the churches persist. Therefore, the two churches standing near the convent were probably more ancient than the Cathedral itself, those of martyrs Saint Hripsime and Saint Gayane.⁵² Although less scientific at its core, his work is still a beneficial addition to the list of travelogues.

⁵⁰ Bryce 1878, p. 300.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 301.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 308.

British Colonel Sir Herbert Charles Chermiside (1850-1929), who was in Etchmiadzin in 1888, briefly described the tomb of Saint Gayane and provided the illustration of Saint Hripsime Church, erected to the right of the road. According to the talk of the monks, the relics of Saint Gayane were taken from Armenia by two Latin monks in the seventeenth century. Fortunately, they were later found, except for some fragments, which by 1830 reached churches in Venice, Goa in India, Nakhichevan, and Galata in Constantinople.⁵³

A note about the scene of the opening of the graves of the martyred virgins Gayane and Hripsime can be found in Ghevont Alishan's (1820-1901) book *Ayrarat*, where the author also talks about the renovations done in the place of the monastery.⁵⁴ While debating about the city's position, he noted that the heart of Etchmiadzin was located in the area of the current Mother Cathedral.⁵⁵

Another Briton, Henry Finnis Blossie Lynch (1862- 1913), documented his travels on paper, and the outcome was a two-volume compilation of places and churches he visited in Armenia and Turkey.⁵⁶ Since Blossie traveled to both countries, the architectural corpus covered more monuments than ever before. He benefitted from the remarkable advances in Armenian epigraphy made late in the previous century by Marie-Félicité Brosset, whose translations Lynch carried with him to Armenia.⁵⁷

However, regardless of the addition of sources and materials available to him, Lynch's approach did not quite vary from previous observations done by his predecessors. For illustration, his ideas were presented in a very subjective, personal way. He interpreted Armenia through English eyes and often reviewed Armenian monuments compared to those in his homeland. An excellent example of this occurred when he tried to define the layout of the monastery of Etchmiadzin.⁵⁸

⁵³ Kiesling, B., *Rediscovering Armenia*, Yerevan/Washington DC 2000, p.34.

⁵⁴ Alishan, G., *Այրարատ, Բնաշխարհ Հայաստանի* [Ayrarat, Armenian Nature World, in Armenian], Venice 1890, p. 242.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 205.

⁵⁶ Lynch, H. F. B., *Armenia, Travels and Studies*, London 1901, 2 vols.

⁵⁷ Maranci 2001, p. 24.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

“Imagine the old court of Trinity College at Cambridge without the gateway, the hall, and the chapel, and with a church of some size placed in the centre where the fountain stands. All four sides of the figure are defined by low buildings, resembling the dwellings which constitute two sides of the Cambridge court. I had always understood that our quadrangle at Trinity was the largest in the world; although I believe some American university was building one a few inches bigger not so long ago...Our cousins across the Atlantic must bestir themselves”.⁵⁹

From Lynch’s writing, we have the feeling that he was a very detailed oriented observer, which gave him the ability to vividly describe the churches of Etchmiadzin and their changes during history. More than any of the other travelers, his work reveals how much architectural tastes of the day affected the reception of medieval monuments. For example, Saint Hripsime was considered superior to the Cathedral because it lacked the so-called “unsightly projections of apsidal arms”. It was the geometric exterior of Hripsime, closer to a perfect rectangle, that was favored. In his judgment, simplicity was the key to quality.⁶⁰

To sum up this part of the chapter, it is noticeable that most Western travelers were familiar with only a certain number of the medieval monuments of Armenia.

Their reports, even when in some cases too subjective and architectonically not always entirely accurate, are one of the most beneficial mediums and should be treated accordingly. When reading closely, one can witness everyday life at the monastery and become a visitor of the churches at the different stages of their existence.

C) Beyond and after the travelers – Scholars of the 19th century

The results of the travelogues bore their fruit later, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century when a prominent French archeologist and historian, Charles Texier (1802-1871), wrote a study describing the art of Armenia, Persia, and

⁵⁹ Lynch 1901, vol. 1, p. 243.

⁶⁰ Maranci 2001, pp. 24. For the original citation, see Lynch 1901, vol. 1, p. 269.

Mesopotamia. In the extensive work, the author presents the general monuments and their problem as well as asks himself questions about the initial structure and function of the churches. One of the questions he acknowledged and tried to answer was how to resolve the formal similarity of Armenian and Western medieval architecture.⁶¹

German scholar Karl Schnaase (1798-1875) later published a quality issue on art history, including a chapter on Armenian art.⁶² His research was shaped by studies of Dubois and Texier. We cannot omit his impact on the field and historians coming after him, especially Josef Strzygowski.⁶³

In the part of the book talking about the architecture of Armenia, Schnaase dedicated himself to identifying an “Armenian style”. To illustrate its features, he used the plan of the church of Saint Hripsime. He then compared its scheme to the churches of San Vitale in Ravenna and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The only feature distinguishing the Armenian and Byzantine models, as Schnaase noted, was the shape of the base of the drum. At Hripsime, it is rectangular, while in the two Byzantine monuments, it is a circle or square. However, as we can observe, his conclusions relied exclusively on the plan of the Saint Hripsime church, which he claimed to be typical of Armenian architecture.⁶⁴ He dated the Church of Saint Hripsime in the tenth century. He defined the Armenian churches as rectangular at the base of their drum and perimeter walls. Therefore, this claim did not account for monuments such as Mastara, Bagaran, or Artik, where the drum rests on a square base and four apsidal arms of equal size radiate from the center. He was convinced of this date because of the existing apses and niches and the massing of the exterior, which showed, as he claimed, that the Armenian system was already completely developed. His date for the church was much later than the previous one suggested by Dubois or Texier.⁶⁵ The essence of Schnaase’s ability to observe the technical features of the monuments came from the accounts of travelers.

⁶¹ For Texier’s work on Armenia, including plans, drawings, maps, etc., see Texier, CH., *Description de l’Arménie et de la Perse, de la Mésopotamie*, publié sous les auspices des ministres de l’intérieur et de l’instruction publique, 2 vols., Paris 1842.

⁶² Schnaase 1844.

⁶³ Maranci 2001, p. 30.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 32.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 33.

One of his most considerable contributions to the study of Armenian architecture was Schnaase's conviction that it belonged to the shelves of general surveys of art history. He relied on the ground plans and structural rather than sculptural elements to distinguish between styles. The importance was placed on domical construction, and the stress on the racial element was afterward taken up by Strzygowski.⁶⁶

D) At the turn of the 20th century

From the beginning of the twentieth century, we have a study of Etchmiadzin monuments by Armenian archbishop Mesrop Ter-Movsesian.⁶⁷ The first half of the text is focused on the excavations at the Zvartnots Cathedral undertaken by Ter-Movsesian in 1889.⁶⁸ The second part, more interesting for our research, details the early Christian church buildings. Dedicating several chapters to describing the city's history, the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, and the churches of Hripsime and Gayane, Ter-Movsesian drew from other authors such as Shakhhatunians, Alishan, and notably Lynch.

The crucial figure of Armenian scholarship that we must mention in this part is an architect and scholar, T'oros T'oramanyan (1864-1934).⁶⁹ He wrote many publications, supplying readers with a hypothetical reconstruction of the monuments with drawings and plans.

Even though he is famous for his work on the excavations at the Zvartnoc Cathedral (7th century), he also completed a study on the cathedral of Etchmiadzin when visiting the city in March 1908.⁷⁰ In the study, he thoroughly inspected the stones and examined the changes and repairs on each part of the building. In this way, he traced the two, at first almost invisible pediments, near the corner of the walls on both sides of the

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 37.

⁶⁷ Ter-Movsesian, M., "Էջմիածին եւ հայոց հնագոյն եկեղեցիներ" [Etchmiadzin and ancient Armenian churches, in Armenian], in: *Ազգագրական Հանդես* [Ethnographic Conference, in Armenian], vol. XVI (Tiflis 1907), pp. 130-204.

⁶⁸ Ter-Movsesian 1889.

⁶⁹ For a bibliography about T'oramanyan, see, for example, Marr, N., "По поводу работы архитектора Т.Тораманяна: О древнейших формах Эчмиадзинского храма" in: *Записки Восточного Отделения Императорского Русского Археологического Общества XIX* (1910), pp. 52-63.

⁷⁰ T'oramanyan continued with the main excavations of the Zvartnots Cathedral, which began by Ter-Movsesian.

protruding apse of the northern façade. It reminded him of the ancient eastern façade of the Church of the Apostles in Ani.⁷¹ He also assumed that perhaps, there were two other chapels on the east side, the façade of one of which is the fragment of the pediment and the remains of the adjacent temple wall.⁷²

T'oramanyan concluded that the original Etchmiadzin structure was built by Vahan Mamikonean in the fifth century and altered by Catholicos Komitas in 618. Later in the mid of the seventh century, Nerses III, “The Builder,” reconstructed it with projecting apses. He supported the idea that the previous phase of the church was a tetraconch like the present complex, except that the lateral apses were inscribed within the square core of the present church and buttressed a central wooden dome. Nevertheless, archeological excavations during the 1950s and 60s uncovered no traces of a square structure with inscribed apses.⁷³

T'oramanyan believed that the five-domed type of church occurs in the sixth-century church of Avan and later in the tenth-century church of the Apostles in Ani.⁷⁴ According to the author, Etchmiadzin provided the original form of the early Christian church in Armenia.⁷⁵ At the same time, he also suggested the role of indigenous traditions and a combination of Armenian and Roman forms used in early churches. Therefore, in his opinion, local traditions came not so much from the indigenous but rather from an imperfect imitation of the classical.⁷⁶ The four-apsed layout of the fifth-century Cathedral served as a model for later churches such as Hripsime as well as other hexagonal and octagonal structures:

⁷¹ T'oramanyan, T. “Էջմիածնի տաճարը. Ճարտարապետական և հնագիտական հետազոտություն” [The Temple of Etchmiadzin. Architectural and archaeological research, in Armenian], in: *Ազգագրական Հանդես* [Ethnographic Conference, in Armenian], vol. XIX, no. 1 (Tiflis 1910), p. 166.

⁷² Ibidem, p. 171.

⁷³ Maranci 2001, p. 56.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 56.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 59.

⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 62.

“Probably the first seventh-century example was the church of Hripsime, with four apses inscribed within the church. Then the appearance of six, eight, and more apses became more common...”⁷⁷

T'oramanyan's constant effort in studying and cataloging the monuments has led to bigger awareness of the scholars to safeguard and protect the Armenian monuments. He believed that the architecture of the Caucasus needed to be presented to European academics in a more appropriate way than it was ever before.⁷⁸ For that reason, when in 1913, he got the opportunity to work with Austrian historian Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941) on a comprehensive study, and he took it without hesitation.⁷⁹ They met during a summer seminar in Vienna and later arranged a three-week trip to Russian Armenia, where they further studied and photographed the early medieval monuments. The plan was to finish the book in two years while T'oramanyan would stay working in Armenia and send the materials to Strzygowski, who was in Vienna. A year after that, World War I started, and unfortunately for T'oramanyan, it was no longer possible to travel back to Europe.⁸⁰

In 1918, Josef Strzygowski published *Die Baukunst Der Armenier Und Europa*.⁸¹ It was the most comprehensive and comparative study of Armenian architecture ever written, raising attention towards the Caucasus among Western scholars.⁸²

Even though Strzygowski acknowledged T'oramanyan's materials and efforts in cooperation on the book, T'oramanyan was not satisfied with the outcome and believed

⁷⁷ Ibidem, pp. 64-65. The translated quote of T'oramanyan is from Maranci. For the original, see T'oramanyan, T., *Նյութեր հայկական նարտարապետության պատմության* [Materials for the History of Armenian Architecture, in Armenian], H. A. Orbeli (eds.), vol. I, Yerevan, 1942-48, p. 173.

⁷⁸ For review on T'oramanyan's work see Marr 1910, p. 52-63.

⁷⁹ On Strzygowski in general see e.g. *Orient oder Rom?: history and reception of a historiographical myth (1901-1970)*, Ivan Foletti, Francesco Lovino eds, Rome 2018 and Elsner 2020, pp. 120-127. For the “Armenian” question, see Maranci 2001/2002, pp. 287-307; Maranci 1998, pp. 363-380.

⁸⁰ T'oramanyan 1942-48, p. 81.

⁸¹ Strzygowski, J., *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa*, 2 vols., Vienna 1918.

⁸² In the past years, the work of Strzygowski has been a subject of closer study by Professor Christina Maranci.

he had been betrayed. We know about the events from a letter to Stepan Lisitsyan, written on 12th February 1929:

“Unfortunate years changed my fate, and instead of being morally rewarded for my hard work, I ended up in the most miserable situation. Even the scientists, on whom I had the greatest confidence, did not spare me and blackened the fate of me and my 15-20 years of work.”⁸³ (...) “The incidents of WWI prevented me from going to Vienna the following year. The roads were closed. The great Prof. Strzygowski did not wait for my departure any longer or lost hope; contrary to our agreement, he published the two volumes himself.”⁸⁴

The nearly nine-hundred-page *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* aimed almost solely at the origins and diffusion of the domed, centrally planned buildings, which were perceived as an Aryan creation. The main idea was not only to advocate for what the author recognized as Aryan but also to question the supremacy of classical architectural theories.⁸⁵

To better comprehend Strzygowski’s ideas and captivation with the North, the historical and intellectual context must be taken into account. In the early twentieth century, especially during World War I, the origins of Romanesque and Gothic were topics of heated nationalism.⁸⁶ Most contemporary scholarly theories treated Armenian and Georgian architecture as a Transcaucasian subdivision of Byzantine architecture. The socio-political situation in Vienna only added to Strzygowski’s decision to treat

⁸³ T’oramanyan, T., *Նամակներ* [Letters, in Armenian], Yerevan 1968, p. 352.

Translated from the original by the author: “Դժբախտ տարիներ իմ ճակատագիրը փոխեցին և փոխանակ այդ բազմաչարչար աշխատությունու գեթ բարոյապես վարձատրվելու, ամենադժբախտ վիճակի հասաւ. նայնիսկ գիտնականներ, որոնց վրա ամենամեծ վստահությունը ունեցաւ, նրանք իսկ չի խնայեցին ինձ և սև արին թե՛ իմ և թե՛ 15-20 տարվա աշխատությանս ճակատագիրը.” See T’oramanyan 1968, p. 352.

⁸⁴ T’oramanyan 1968, p. 353.

Translated from the original by the author: “Դժբախտ պատահարներ արգելք եղան իմ հետևյալ տարին Վիեննա գնալուս, ճանապարհները փակված էին, մեծամուն այր. Ստրիզովսկի այլևս չսպասեց իմ գնալուս և կամ հույսը կտրեց, հակառակ մեր պայմանի, ինքը հրատարակեց երկու հատոր.”

⁸⁵ Maranci, CH., “Building Churches in Armenia: Art at the Borders of Empire and the Edge of the Canon”, in: *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 88, no. 4 (Dec., 2006), p. 656.

⁸⁶ Maranci 2001, p. 153.

Armenian architecture as a separate entity and, more or less, omit Georgian monuments in this context.⁸⁷

Generally, most historians considered his ideology of tracing the origins of Gothic architecture to Armenia and the attempt to merge all the monuments in one typological line slightly problematic. The criticism was explicitly based on his inventive approach concerning chronology, which initiated a long intellectual debate and influenced the scholarship track.⁸⁸ Although repelled by his ideology, subsequent Armenologists have generally maintained its formal approach, concentrating on documenting monuments and forming architectural typologies.⁸⁹

Strzygowski followed the history of the old royal city of Vagharshapat, where according to him, the patriarchs only moved later, but apparently before the penetration of Greek-Syrian influence.⁹⁰ The Austrian scholar dated the foundations of the Etchmiadzin Cathedral to the late 5th century and the other two church buildings to the 7th century with later restorations. Only the small chapel at today's Schoghakat church has disappeared down to its foundations.⁹¹ Saint Gayane was not possible to date with certainty since it does not possess any inscription mentioning the construction. The church of Saint Hripsime, built by Catholicos Komitas, was dated to the year 618 and put

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 161.

⁸⁸ For the contemporary opinions on Strzygowski's work, see Marquand, A., "Strzygowski and His Theory of Early Christian Art", in: *The Harvard Theological Review* III/3 (1910), pp. 357–365; Herzfeld, E., "Review: Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa", in *Wasmuth's Monatsheft für Baukunst und Städtebau* IV, Berlin (1919-1920), pp. 2-5, 24-33; Bissing, F., W., *Kunstforschung oder Kunstwissenschaft? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der Arbeitsweise Josef Strzygowski, Abhandlung der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Germany 1950; Marchand, S. L., "The Rhetoric of Artifacts and the Decline of Classical Humanism: The Case of Josef Strzygowski", in: *History and Theory* XXXIII/4 (1994), pp. 106–130.

For modern reviews, see Maranci, CH., *Medieval Armenian architecture in historiography: Josef Strzygowski and his legacy*, PhD thesis (Princeton University), vol.1, New Jersey 1998; Maranci, CH., "Armenian Architecture as Aryan Architecture: The Role of Indo-European Scholarship in the Theories of Josef Strzygowski", in: *Visual Resources* XIII/3–4, (1998), pp. 363-380; Maranci, CH., "Basilicas and Black Holes: The Legacy of Josef Strzygowski and the Case of Armenian Architecture", in: *Acta Historiae Artium* XLVII/1 (2006), pp. 313–320; Grigor, T., "Orient oder Rom? Qajar 'Aryan' Architecture and Strzygowski's Art History", in: *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 89, no. 3 (Sep. 2007), pp. 562-590; Foletti, I., Lovino, F., *Orient oder Rom? History and Reception of a Historiographical Myth (1901-1970)*, Rome 2018.

⁸⁹ Maranci 2006, p.656.

⁹⁰ Strzygowski 1918, vol. 1, p. 276.

⁹¹ Strzygowski 1918, vol. 1, p. 66.

in a category of an alternative domed square type. Its type is very similar to the church of the Apostles at Ani.⁹²

Strzygowski also wrote a more thorough chapter about the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin in his book *Das Etchmiadzin Evangeliar: beiträge zur geschichte der armenischen, ravennatischen und syro-ägyptischen Kunst*. The book was written before *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa*. Strzygowski talks about the outcome of his publication as a tipping point that deepened studies of Armenian monuments conducted separately from Georgia. The author was glad, as he said that the Armenians had taken charge of researching and excavating their art monuments since then.⁹³

The chapter began with a vivid depiction of the road leading to Etchmiadzin and continued with a description of the monastery. Strzygowski later in the text followed the theory of Dubois and his attempt to reconstruct the oldest foundations of the original structure.⁹⁴ The Cathedral's plan was later described as corresponding to the scheme of the Byzantine domed church, which has only been valid since Justinian. In the author's words, there can be no question of an origin in an earlier period, let alone in the year 302.⁹⁵ The question of the inscription was also presented. Contrary to what Boré said, according to Strzygowski, the two inscriptions in the Cathedral cannot be used to indicate that Christianity had already found its way into Armenian lands before Gregory the Illuminator.⁹⁶ Instead, according to him, they prove that Greek script and language were still used in Armenia after Mesrop Mashtoc invented the alphabet.⁹⁷

Die Baukunst and other works by Strzygowski should even nowadays have a place on the bookshelves of everyone interested in a deeper understanding of Armenian studies. To deny his influence on future scholarship would be an act of neglect. Some modern historians are generally more critical of his comments and proposed theories, such as the belief in the migration of architectural forms from East to West. While examining contemporary texts in the field, we notice that only a few authors drew general

⁹² Maranci 2001, p. 109

⁹³ Strzygowski 1918, vol. 1, p. 6.

⁹⁴ Strzygowski, J., *Das Etchmiadzin Evangeliar: beiträge zur geschichte der armenischen, ravennatischen und syro-ägyptischen Kunst*, Vienna 1891, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Strzygowski 1891, p. 5.

⁹⁶ Boré 1840.

⁹⁷ Strzygowski 1891, p. 9.

conclusions from the material. In most cases, these topics are discussed in general surveys. Despite the extensive descriptions, and accessible plans and photographs, the fundamental questions concerned with the origins of Armenian architecture and its relations to Iran and Byzantium remained almost untouched.⁹⁸

E) Second half of the 20th century

In Soviet times it was primarily the Armenian art historians who could study the three churches in situ since the distance, political situation, and language barrier limited Western scholars. From this, we can notice the different perspectives applied to the research and its outcome.

The Armenian part of the bibliography raised in number, especially after the excavations carried out in Etchmiadzin under the direction of Alexander Sahinyan in the year 1955-66 and 1959. The publications of their results attributed the creation of the Cathedral's architectural type to the master builders of Vahan Mamikonian. In addition to a certain number of problems that remained unresolved in the publications of this scholar, others have also arisen because of the proposed dating.⁹⁹ A disagreement, often

⁹⁸ Maranci 1998, vol. 1, p. 5.

⁹⁹ For Sahinyan's work about and after the excavations see Sahinyan, A., “ՆՈՐ ՆՅՈՒԹԵՐ ԷՉՄԻԱԾՆԻ ՄԱՅՐ ՏԱՃԱՐԻ ԿԱՌՈՒՑՎԱԾՔԻ ՎԵՐԱԲԵՐՅԱԼ” [New Materials about the structure of the Etchmiadzin Mother Cathedral, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Մայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, VIII-IX. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin (1956), pp. 60-69; Sahinyan, A., “ՆՈՐ ՆՅՈՒԹԵՐ ԷՉՄԻԱԾՆԻ ՄԱՅՐ ՏԱՃԱՐԻ ԿԱՌՈՒՑՎԱԾՔԻ ՎԵՐԱԲԵՐՅԱԼ” [New Materials about the structure of the Etchmiadzin Mother Cathedral, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Մայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, XI-XII. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin (1956), pp. 56-67; Sahinyan, A., “Էջմիածնի Մայր Տաճարի հարստարապետական կերպարը” [The architectural image of the Holy Mother of Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Մայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, Է. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin (1959) pp. 43-63; Sahinyan, A., “Էջմիածնի Մայր Տաճարի հարստարապետական կերպարը” [The architectural image of the Holy Mother of Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Մայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, Ա. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin (1961) pp. 43-63; Sahinyan, A. "Recherches Scientifiques sous les Voutes de la Cathedrale d'Etchmiadzine", *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, 3, (1966), pp. 39-71; Sahinyan, A. “Էջմիածնի Մայր տաճարի սկզբնական տեսքը” [The original view of Etchmiadzin Cathedral, in Armenian], in: *Patma-Banasirakan Handes*, 3 (1966), pp. 71-94; Sahinyan, A., "Մոդուլային համակարգը Էջմիածնի Մայր տաճարի V դարի գմբեթակիր կառուցվածքում“ [The Module System in the 5th Century Cupola Structures of the Cathedral of Echmiadzin, in Armenian], in *Patma-Banasirakan Handes*, 2 (1978), pp. 140-158.

apparent, persists between the literary sources, the archaeological material, their understanding, and the scientific conclusions based on these interpretations.¹⁰⁰

To generalize, the specialists were optionally divided into two groups. The first maintained Sahinyan's position regarding the date when the current typology of the Cathedral was created (late fifth century) and discussed his hypothesis on the basilica form of the earlier building. The second took that typology back to the beginning of the fourth century, so to say, to the time of Saint Gregory the Illuminator.¹⁰¹

Two critical publications by Armen Khatchatrian and Stepan Mnac'akyanyan were later released to present hypotheses that wanted to reconcile archeology and written sources.¹⁰²

Khatchatrian, who was a student of André Grabar, devoted a section of his book *L'architecture arménienne du IV au VI siècle*, purely to the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin and churches of Saint Hripsime and Gayane.¹⁰³ He started the narration in a "traditional" way of telling the story of the Armenian conversion to Christianity, mentioning the legend and the future churches built on the site. As he stated, after evangelizing the king and his court, Gregory built martyria at Vagharshapat.¹⁰⁴ However, several aspects suggest that the core of his theories needs to be revised.

The historian reopened the debate on the primitive aspect of the Cathedral. Its theophanic foundation was invoked and even became an argument for stratigraphic dating. He supplemented the text with several plans and pictures, one showing the hypothetical view of the fourth-century plan. For Khatchatrian, the previous church was not a basilica but an inscribed cross with free supports and a cupola, like the current

¹⁰⁰ Garibian de Vartavan, N., "L'aspect primitif de l'église-mère Edjmiatsin", *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, 29 (2003-2004), p. 404.

¹⁰¹ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 284.

See Grigoryan 1986; Hasrat'yan 2003.

¹⁰² Khatchatrian, A., *L'architecture arménienne du IV au VI siècle*, Paris 1971; Mnatsakanyan, S., *Крестовокупольные композиции Армении и Византии V-VII веков* [Cross-domed compositions of Armenia and Byzantium of the 5th-7th centuries, in Russian] Moscow 1989. See also his older paper: Mnatsakanyan, S., "Вопросы Формирования Эчмиадзинского Кафедрала в контексте Эволюции Крестово Купольных Систем" [Structural Principles of the Cathedral of Echmiadzin within the Context of Developing Systems of Cross-Shaped Cupolas, in Russian], (1987).

¹⁰³ For a review of Khatchatrian's work on Etchmiadzin, see Maranci 2001, pp. 194-205.

¹⁰⁴ Khatchatrian 1971, p. 14.

building, without projecting apses. According to the scholar, during the fifth century, it was replaced by a new church with the same perimeter and the same type.¹⁰⁵ The argument was based mainly on the presence of two superimposed bases. While the upper base belonged to the fifth century, the lower, broader base was dated to the fourth. His chronology is based on style, meaning the earlier ones were simpler with less articulation and variations.¹⁰⁶

Many large and small publications have been dedicated to Etchmiadzin, its history, and its architecture. Nevertheless, we have to say that, in general, the amount of information gathered about architecture and specific details about the churches are usually repeated and presented only as a part of broader studies about the architecture of Armenia.¹⁰⁷

The chapter addressing Armenian and Georgian architecture in Richard Krautheimer's *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* provides a relatively short description of the monuments.¹⁰⁸ Conclusions are few, and Krautheimer admits the problem of locating Armenia within the development of medieval architecture. He reacted to the theories of Strzygowski, saying that Saint Hripsime and Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome resemble each other but vaguely and only on paper.¹⁰⁹

Alpago Novello commented how in the first decades of the century, Armenian architecture was at the center of a controversy between the "Orientalist" theories of

¹⁰⁵ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 291.

¹⁰⁶ Maranci 2001, p. 202.

¹⁰⁷ See for example, Gombos, K., *Armenia. Landscape and Architecture*, Budapest 1974; Krautheimer, R., Ćurčić, S., *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Harmondsworth and New York 1986; Cuneo, P., et al., *Architettura Armena dal quarto al diciannovesimo secolo*, Rome 1988; Harutyunyan, V., *Հայկական նարտարասպետության պատմություն* [History of Armenian Architecture, in Armenian], Yerevan 1992; Hasratian, M., *Early Christian Architecture of Armenia* [in Russian and English], Moscow 2000.

There are several monographs on Etchmiadzin Cathedral, nevertheless not on the other 3 churches. See for example, Bastamians, V., *Նկարագրություն Մայր Եկեղեցիոյն հայոց Ս. Էջմիածնի* [Description of Mother Church of Holy Ejmiatsin, in Armenian and Russian], Etchmiadzin 1877; Parsamian, V., *Էջմիածինն անցյալում: Պատմական ուսումնասիրության փորձ* [Etchmiadzin in the past: An attempt of historical research, in Armenian] Yerevan 1931; Khachatryan, T., *Մայր Էջմիածին. քրիստոնեական սառչին գմբեթավոր տաճարը* [Holy Etchmiadzin: The First Christian Domed Church, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Krautheimer, R., *Early Christian and Byzantine architecture*, Baltimore 1965.

¹⁰⁹ Maranci 1998, vol. 1, p. 4.

Strzygowski and the ‘Western Roman’ theories of Rivoira regarding medieval architecture.¹¹⁰ It is noticeable that the author believed that the issues raised by the Austrian historian had been overcome, so there was no need to confront them.¹¹¹ As Maranci also pointed out, Novello avoided confronting the issues raised by Strzygowski that he believed passed.¹¹²

Novello cooperated with fellow Armenian scholars Armen Zarian, Ara Zarian, and Anahit Ter Minassian on a broad series of books on Armenian medieval architecture. On the first few pages of each volume, Novello sums up the foundation and the ideas that are the bases of the series. Notably, in the volume *Vagharshapat*, the historians discussed the issues of the Cathedral’s dating, the city’s urban planning, and the remaining churches’ constructions. The *Vagharshapat* combines surveys and short essays complemented with mostly unpublished photographs. It is one of the first successful attempts to present the city of Etchmiadzin and its churches to Western readers in one comprehensive study.

In 1975 S. Sardaryan wrote an article published in the *Herald of the Social Sciences* dealing with archeological and bibliographical data of the city, which helped him to reconstruct the topography of the ancient city. These sources made it possible to determine the city’s location and highlight the issues of primary settlement and life expectancy on its territory.¹¹³

F) Modern research

Visible progress can be seen in the scholarship from the early twentieth century to the present. The 1950s and 60s witnessed a withdrawal from broad comparative studies

¹¹⁰ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 1.

See Rivoira, G., T., *Architettura musulmana: sue origini e suo sviluppo*, Milan 1914.

¹¹¹ Alpago Novello, A., “L’architettura armena tra oriente e occidente”, *Gli armeni*, Milano 1986, p. 131.

¹¹² Maranci 2001, p. 215.

¹¹³ Sardaryan, S., A., “Հին Վաղարշապատի տեղադրությունը ըստ հնագիտական և մասնագրական տվյալների” [Location of ancient Vagharshapat according to archaeological and bibliographical data, in Armenian], in: *Լրաբեր հասարակական գիտությունների* [Herald of the Social Sciences, in Armenian], vol. 7 (1975), pp. 52-69.

towards more insular works, such as monographic and typological studies. At the same time, the historians tried to outline the indigenous origins of Armenian architecture.¹¹⁴

The area of the city and the churches of Etchmiadzin were part of the extensive paper prepared for the convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.¹¹⁵ The document includes a detailed report of restorations, urban plans, and a list containing every tombstone and khachkar on the site.¹¹⁶

In the new millennium, the area and temples of Etchmiadzin have been studied by Nazénie Garibian de Vartavan. In her studies, she focused mainly on the relationship between the Armenian city and its connection to the concept of Heavenly Jerusalem.

La Jérusalem Nouvelle deals directly with the question of how the Armenian pilgrimage to the Holy Land influenced and shaped the change of the Etchmiadzin into an image of Jerusalem.¹¹⁷ Garibian shows a new approach to studying the design of the Cathedral. To a great extent, her method contextualizes the critical documents about church design by liturgy and theology. In her other article, Garibian de Vartavan focused on the primitive aspect of the Mother Church.¹¹⁸ She presented new hypotheses and observations and proposed a different dating of the Cathedral based on the Sahinyan's excavations.

There is no monograph about Saint Gayane church. However, the article published by Nerseh Khalatian about the renovation done at the site gets close to that.¹¹⁹ The church

¹¹⁴ Maranci 2001, p. 240.

¹¹⁵ Anonymous, *Nomination to the World Heritage List, Echmiatsin and the archeological site of Zvartnots*, Yerevan 2000. Online at: <https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1011.pdf>; See also Anonymous, *Scientific and Cultural Organization Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Committee*, 41st session, Krakow 2017, pp. 6-8. Online at: [Adoption of retrospective Statements of Outstanding Universal Value \(unesco.org\)](https://whc.unesco.org/en/adopted).

¹¹⁶ Khachkar, commonly known as a cross-stone, is a typical Armenian stone monument created often for protection and commemoration purposes. For more about khachkars, see Petrosyan, H., *Khachkar: the origins, symbolism and applications*, Yerevan 2008.

¹¹⁷ Garibian de Vartavan, N., *La Jérusalem nouvelle et les premiers sanctuaires chrétiens de l'Arménie*, Yerevan 2009. See also Garibian de Vartavan, N., "La Jérusalem du IV^e siècle et le récit de la conversion de l'Arménie", in: *Mélanges Jean-Pierre Mahé, Travaux et mémoires* 18 (Paris 2014), pp. 353-368.

¹¹⁸ Garibian de Vartavan, "L'aspect primitif de l'église-mère Edjmiatsin", in: *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, 29 (2003-2004), pp. 403-501. See also Garibian de Vartavan, N., "Վահան Մամիկոնեանի կողմից եջմիածնի Մայր Տաճարի վերակառուցման թուականի շուրջ" [About the Date of the Reconstruction of the Etchmiadzin Cathedral by Vahan Mamikonian, in Armenian], in: *Հանդես Ամսորայ* [Handes Amsorya, in Armenian], 122, Vienna (2008), pp. 147-158.

¹¹⁹ Khalatian, N. FR., "Ս. Գայանե Վանքի վերանորոգությունները" [Restoration of St. Gayane Monastery, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության*

was dated to the time of Catholicos Eyr, specifically the year 630. Other than the report on the construction process and its changes over time, the author referred to the Catholicoi and their contribution to the development of the holy place.

A crucial addition to Armenian scholarship was made by Armen Kazaryan, the author of several publications touching on the history of early Christian architecture in Transcaucasian countries. First, we have to mention his monograph on the Cathedral.¹²⁰ The author analyzed the ideas that influenced the choice of iconography, and his main goal was to reconstruct the church's original appearance. In the end, he proposed a new reconstruction of the monument.

Another fundamental monograph by Kazaryan is four volumes book about the architecture of Armenia from the fourth to the seventh century.¹²¹ The first volume is dedicated to Saint Hripsime and the Cathedral. The second one includes Saint Gayane.

An essential part of each volume is a catalog of architectural monuments, which follows a uniform description scheme: architectural type, function, dedication, topography, history, restoration works, reconstruction issues, decor, and dating. Also, here, the author pays much attention to the most critical issue, so to say, the reconstruction of the original appearance.

This monograph is a significant work that sums up more than a century of study of the early Christian architecture of Transcaucasia and opens up new prospects for developing this area. Kazaryan's view was that geographical boundaries do not always determine the ethnic background of the monuments. He argued against Strzygowski's ideology and the tradition of the Soviet epoch when it was convenient to study the historical processes, particularly the histories of national architectures, in the boundaries of the Soviet Republic.

Մայր Աթոռու Սրբայր Էջմիածին, ԿԴ (Գ) [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin (2008), pp. 55-72.

¹²⁰ Kazaryan, A., *Кафедральный собор Сурб Эчмиадзин и восточнохристианское зодчество IV- VII веков* [Cathedral of Holy Eymiacin and the Eastern Christian architecture of the 4th–7th centuries, in Russian], Moscow 2007.

¹²¹ Kazaryan, A., *Церковная архитектура стран Закавказья VII века. Формирование и развитие традиции* [Church Architecture of the 7th Century in Transcaucasian countries. Formation and development of the tradition, in Russian] Vol. 1-4, Moscow 2012.

Several articles and books by Patrick Donabédian have been the source of engaging discussions on Armenian medieval architecture. One of his research goals was to apprehend some significant characteristics of the beginnings of sacred architecture in Armenia.

In his 2007 article, he described the three sanctuaries built by Saint Gregory the Illuminator.¹²² Saint Gayane and Saint Hripsime, according to Donabédian, both originated as chapels and were rebuilt at the turn of the fourth and later in the seventh century. In connection to Saint Gayane, this type of martyrium was illustrated in particular by the mausoleum of Saint Mashtots in Oshakan, built in the years 442-443.¹²³

The Cathedral was again mentioned on pages of the book *L'Archéologie du bâti en Europe*.¹²⁴ As is typical, the author started his narration with the legendary story of the martyrs Gayane and Hripsime, who were buried under the churches. He also stated that it is almost impossible to know the former state of the Cathedral since many restorations were made. Be that as it may, the current state and the work of Sahinyan, Khatchatrian, and Kazaryan allowed him to move forward with a theory that the Cathedral probably appeared already at the end of the fifth century.¹²⁵

It is noticeable that not many publications pay close attention to the carved details on the churches. Instead, most studies focus on the architectural descriptions and hypothetical recreation of the plans.

Fortunately for Armenian historiography, there is a reliable source of information in the multi-faceted lithographs embedded in the walls of historical-architectural monuments. In 2016, Arsen Harutyunyan, a researcher at the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences in Armenia, published a large-scale lithographic study. His work is remarkable in its extent since it covers more than 700

¹²² Donabédian, P., “Les premiers édifices chrétiens d’Arménie (IVe-Vie siècle)”, in: *Armenia sacra. Mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IVe-XVIIIe siècle)*, Paris 2007, pp. 48-59.

¹²³ Donabédian 2007, p. 51. See also Donabédian, P., *L’âge d’or de l’architecture arménienne: VIIe siècle*, Marseille 2008.

¹²⁴ Donabédian P., “Les débuts de l’architecture chrétienne en Orient: Les premières églises à coupole d’Arménie”, in: *L’Archéologie du bâti en Europe = Археологія домобудівництва Європи*, L. Iakovleva, O. Korvin-Piotrovskiy, F. Djindjian (eds.), Kiev 2013, pp. 346-364.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 349.

inscriptions placed on the walls of the historical and architectural monuments located in the area, such as spiritual and secular buildings, khachkars, and tombstones.

It is the first comprehensive study where Etchmiadzin is presented to the reader based on lithographs. In addition to the 188 previously published lithographs, there are 520 more that are being put to scientific examination for the first time. The result of this project was the discovery and clarification of newly discovered facts and realities regarding the activity of many spiritual and secular persons related to the monastic centers of the city, greatly enriching our knowledge about the spiritual aspects that played a considerable role in the life of the Armenian people.¹²⁶

Avetis Avetysian did the newest lithographic research during the restoration of the Cathedral in 2018-2019.¹²⁷ Avetysian discovered five new commemorative and donation inscriptions. He also adjusted and provided a new interpretation of some of the previously published lithographs.¹²⁸

The latest study of the South Caucasus I will mention is *Travel Notes 4. Art of medieval Armenia and Georgia. South Caucasus*.¹²⁹ The book is a beautiful cooperation of art historians and students who studied the Armenian monuments for several years and also traveled to the region under the direction of Professor Ivan Foletti. The texts are composed to guide the travelers and visitors of the Caucasus through the historical and architectural background of the chosen monuments. There are three articles dedicated to the churches of Etchmiadzin. One of the articles about Saint Gayane Church is written by the author of this thesis.¹³⁰

Conclusion

As we have seen, most Western travelers knew only a small number of the medieval churches of Armenia; before Lynch, few other than those at Etchmiadzin and

¹²⁶ Harutyunyan, A., ՎԱԳՀԱՐՇԱՊԱՏ Վանքեր և վիմագրական արձանագրություններ [VAGHARSHAPAT Monasteries and epigraphic inscriptions, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 2016.

¹²⁷ Avetysian, A., “Նորահայտ վիմական արձանագրություններ և վիմագրական ճշգրտումներ Էջմիածնի Մայր տաճարում” [Newly discovered epigraphs and epigraphy revisions in Etchmiadzin Cathedral, in Armenian], in: Հայագիտության հարցեր [Armenological Issues Bulletin, in Armenian], vol. 1, No. 19, (Yerevan) 2020, pp. 113-128.

¹²⁸ Ibidem, p. 114.

¹²⁹ The original name in Czech is *Zápisky z cest 4. Umění středověké Arménie a Gruzie. Jižní Kavkaz*.

¹³⁰ Baraničová 2022, pp. 99-107.

Ani Cathedral were cited.¹³¹ As a result of their reports and various pictorial depictions of the buildings, the reader has a chance to appreciate their qualities better. Thanks to these accounts, the memory of the churches is forever preserved on paper.

The research on the churches and the whole city of Etchmiadzin still has gaps. The churches, mainly the Cathedral, are described in almost every book dealing with Armenian architecture. The interest in studying Armenian architecture was raised mostly during the Soviet period, thanks to Strzygowski's publication. In recent years, scholars united their opinions when dating the first constructions of the churches, and in general, the archeological descriptions are rich in number. Very little new information emerged since Sahinyan excavated in the 1950s. Therefore, further excavations are necessary to develop advanced or innovative theories. Until then, we can only theorize and derive from the previous analyses.

3 The churches within the city

The temples within the urban territory of Etchmiadzin can be seen as original and characteristic examples of the building types developed in the formative period of Armenian architecture from the fourth to the seventh century. This is due to the particular nature of their plans and volumetric structure. These building types can be found in several later projects of Armenian religious architecture as it evolved.

Before proceeding further, this chapter aims to provide essential information about the Cathedral and the three churches in the city area.

3.1 The Etchmiadzin Cathedral

The creation of the Cathedral is closely linked with the legend of a Vision of Gregory the Illuminator, composed by Agathangelos in the fifth century. There are different versions of the stories. According to the most famous one, Gregory saw Jesus

¹³¹ Maranci 2001, p. 28.

Christ descending from Heaven accompanied by angels. Christ then struck the ground with a golden hammer to mark the exact place where the temple should be erected.¹³²

As the first cathedral built in Armenia, it has a long and rich history. It was founded at the beginning of the fourth century, destroyed by the Persians in 364, and restored around the year 400. Later it was demolished again until it was rebuilt in the second half of the fifth century by Vahan Mamikonian (440-510)¹³³. The other restorations were done during the seventh, seventeenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.¹³⁴

At the beginning of its existence, the Cathedral was called “Shoghakat”, meaning a flow or ray of light. It was a term that fully expressed the powerful symbolism of the place. The later name, Edchmiadzin, on the other hand, at least until the thirteenth century when the monastery was supposedly abandoned, was perceived as a “theophany” and not as something that designated a church. It was T'ovma Metzopetzi who is credited with inspiring the move of the seat of the Catholicos to Vagharshapat in 1441 and giving the name “Etchmiadzin” to its oldest cathedral.¹³⁵ The reference was later extended to the whole city even when some travelers used the nickname “*Utch Kliffé – a place of the Three Churches*.”¹³⁶

A) Architectural context and description

The difficulty of studying the monument lies in the lack of information available for nearly eleven centuries, from its foundation to its re-consecration as a Catholicossal seat. Pure architectural descriptions are rare and come mostly from Armenian sources.¹³⁷

The present-day structure has a cruciform plan with apses projecting on all four sides and free-standing piers that define a square space at the center of the building. The least protruding one is on the east side, flanked by rectangular chapels from both sides

¹³² Agathangelos 1976, p. 276.

¹³³ See, for example, Grousset 1947, p. 215; Tourmanoff 1990, p. 333.

¹³⁴ See e.g. the synthesis by Donabédian 2013, p. 349.

¹³⁵ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 8.

¹³⁶ Tournefort 1718, p. 248.

¹³⁷ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 284.

[FIG. 2, 3]. The shape of the apses is polygonal outside but semicircular inside. The central dome with a cupola and a conical roof is supplemented with four belfries on the apses [FIG.4]. The belfries were built in the year 682 under the reign of the Catholicos Eleazar. They were cut from a bright red stone, which creates a contrast with the grey color of the rest of the building. According to Hasratyan, only some portion of the northern and eastern walls of the original building survived.¹³⁸ The building's plan and structure are admired for its harmony and balanced proportions.

The building is strategically located at the crossroads of two main paths leading to the city. It is set in a courtyard surrounded by a rectangular wall with a semi-circular tower on the corners [FIG.5]. The Cathedral is accessible through entrances on each side of the protective wall. Its three doors are ready for use even today, except the fourth on the southern part, which was walled up during the reconstruction phases over the centuries. The western door leads to the altar underneath the central dome, decorated with colorful frescoes and different variations of painted ornaments.

B) Datation and reconstructions

What was the structure's original form at the beginning of the fourth century and the end of the fifth century, or to which period the now-standing building belongs, has been a matter of dispute between scholars for a long time. The hypotheses and conclusions around the current structure's date and typology have varied until now.¹³⁹ It is generally stated that the Cathedral retained the original shape of a tetraconch combined with a rectangle on a polygonal base plan and a central dome on cruciform pillars.

According to Agathangelos, the original structure of the Mother Church was created by King Trdat III and Gregory the Illuminator in the first years of the declaration of the Christian religion in Armenia (301-303).¹⁴⁰

A few historians tried to reconstruct the Cathedral's initial plan. The first travelers, notably Dubois de Montpéroux, envisioned the fourth-century structure where he aimed to recreate it in classical forms with lowered rooflines and no belltowers, recalling

¹³⁸ Hasratyan 2003, p. 267.

¹³⁹ The generally accepted date of the reconstruction of Etchmiadzin was re-examined in the latest bibliography. See Kazaryan 2007, pp. 31-40; Garibian de Vartavan 2009, pp. 289-345.

¹⁴⁰ Sahinyan 1956, p. 63.

features of Roman architecture. He believed that the initial phase of elevation bore three pedimented sections, with the higher one in the center, abutting the apse [FIG. 6]. Despite some flaws in his reconstruction, it inspired many influential scholars after him, such as T'oramanyan and Khatchatrian, who did not diverge very much from his theories.¹⁴¹

Severe damage was caused to the initial structure due to the war against Persians after the year 360. It is assumed that the Catholicos Nerses the Great rebuilt the building after the plunder. However, the chronicles do not specifically mention whether the Catholicos did the restoration himself. It seems more plausible that the building remained in ruins until the reconstruction of Saint Sahak (387- 439), who established his patriarchal seat in the city. Soon after, the church suffered another damage in 406 and 417 due to fire. It was Mamikonian who completely demolished the previous structures and built a new church in 480.¹⁴² After that, almost no written information survived until the beginning of the seventh century, when the Catholicos Komitas replaced the Cathedral's wooden roof with stone and plausibly installed the relics of Saint Gregory the Illuminator.¹⁴³

It is impossible to say with certainty whether King Gagik II (1042-1045), who visited the city, undertook any work there. All that we can say about the following period is that the church was in ruins in the thirteenth century, according to Stepanos Orbelian, and probably remained so until the fifteenth century.¹⁴⁴ According to Garibian de Vartavan, among the various information concerning the reconstruction works, the only ones that we can be sure of are the reconstruction of Saint Sahak (387- 439), that of Vahan Mamikonian (480), and the Catholicos Komitas (618).¹⁴⁵

T'oramanyan addressed the initial, fourth-century phase of the building, which was ruined during the Persian attacks. He concluded that the Governor of Armenia – Vahan Mamikonian, completely demolished the previous structure and restored it from the ground in 480. From the accounts of Lazar Parpetsi talking about Mamikonian

¹⁴¹ Maranci 2001, p. 11. See also note 41, note 71, note 102.

¹⁴² Scholars' opinions on the exact year of Mamikonian's construction usually range from 480-485.

¹⁴³ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 285.

¹⁴⁴ See note 7.

¹⁴⁵ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, pp. 286-287.

rebuilding the church according to its foundations, many scholars argue that the fifth-century church replicated the original cruciform plan.¹⁴⁶

However, in T'oramanyan's theory, the cross shape should not be linked with Gregory the Illuminator or Trdat since this style would not be possible to find in the Christian church built before the fifth century. In his opinion, Gregory did not destroy the previous structure. He suggested that the plan of the Cathedral resembled another fifth-century church of Tekor.¹⁴⁷

Crucial years for the studies of the Cathedral began after the excavations carried out in 1955-56 and 59 under the direction of Alexander Sahinyan.¹⁴⁸ The publication of their results also attributed the creation of this architectural type to the master builders of Vahan Mamikonian, who had the church rebuilt at the end of the fifth century. According to Sahinyan, the Cathedral was originally a vaulted basilica without a cupola, with T-shaped supports.¹⁴⁹ Sahinyan's arguments about the basilican structure were later refuted since later archeological works on the site confirmed the cruciform plan.¹⁵⁰

The excavations uncovered the presence of many mosaic fragments and, therefore, the proof of the existence of a stone dome. These mosaics could not have come from another building nor from the floor of the cathedral, which was paved. As Khatchatrian noted, they could only have come from the vaulted cover of the central dome.¹⁵¹ Diggings also revealed finds of the pagan era, such as a sacrificial altar and an Urartian stele in granite.¹⁵² Khatchatrian's reconstruction of the fourth-century temple on the square plan with tripartite chevet and four cruciform pillars supporting the dome was later proved incorrect by Christina Maranci [FIG. 7].¹⁵³

The archaeological material available to us also includes two fragments of the cornice of the pediments on the northern wall [FIG. 8 a, b] as well as the remnants of the

¹⁴⁶ Maranci 2001, p. 59.

¹⁴⁷ T'oramanyan 1942-48, p. 169. See also Maranci 2001, p. 59.

¹⁴⁸ For Sahinyan's work see note 99.

¹⁴⁹ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 299.

¹⁵⁰ Kazaryan (1999, 1999-2000) takes an intermediate position by considering the current typology to be constructed during the second half of the fourth century. According to Sahinyan (1956, 1959, 1961, 1966), the date of the creation of the current typology is the late fifth century.

¹⁵¹ Khatchatrian 1971, p. 91.

¹⁵² Anonymous 2000, p. 6

¹⁵³ Maranci 2001, p. 202.

roof cornice of the eastern sacristies, which prove that they were covered separately like the church of Tekor [FIG. 9].¹⁵⁴

The analysis of Sahinyan's excavations has revealed the presence of two levels of the ground under the pillars and the existing paving of the church [FIG 10]. Thus, the discoveries belong to two different buildings. It is assumed that the lower-level bases are older and were part of the first stages of the construction.¹⁵⁵ Yet, according to Donabédian, the data provided by the second level are more reliable. He deduced that the system which can be reconstructed from these bases seems designed to carry a stone dome, even if the hypothesis of a possible pyramid roof in a wooden frame by Kazaryan cannot be excluded.¹⁵⁶

On the other hand, by their form and arrangement, the lower bases correspond to a building of the basilican type with three naves and a projecting apse, with a barrel-vaulted covering - a type widespread in Armenia. According to Sahinyan, the mosaic fragments and the two horizontal slabs in front of the altar also belonged to this church. They would testify to the existence of a crypt.¹⁵⁷

Therefore, we can conclude that the first construction has been identified as the one erected by Gregory the Illuminator and the second as the Mother Church of Vahan Mamikonian.

Various inscriptions resolving the dates of different reconstructions have been found over the years inside the Cathedral and on the khachkars outside the building. They provide valuable information about the initiatives of Catholicos over the centuries, about the nature and extent of the construction works, the persons executing them, the offerings

¹⁵⁴ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 287.

¹⁵⁵ See Sahinyan 1956, p. 67-69.

Sahinyan compares the base of the Cathedral with other fifth-century churches of Kasagh and Ashtarak. Not only the general form of the lower anchors of the facades of Etchmiadzin is similar to the general form of similar early Christian monuments of Kasagh and Ashtarak, but also there is an obvious similarity between the nature of their designs. In the three-nave structures of Kasagh and Ashtarak, the eastern, western, and fronts of the pediments facing the central part of the temple have equal sizes. And the structures, as they are known, are not dome-bearing but basilical structures with a vaulted roof. See Sahinyan 1956, p. 68.

¹⁵⁶ Donabédian 2013, pp. 348-349. For Kazaryan, see notes 120,121.

¹⁵⁷ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 288.

of the donors, and other aspects, as a result creating a more or less idea about the general state and condition of the temple at different periods.

Two Greek inscriptions of a religious nature, dated by Avetysian to the fourth century, were found carved on the eastern part of the north wall next to two sculptural reliefs. From the subsequent centuries until the 1530s, no stone inscriptions of the temple have come down to us. One of the reasons for that might be that for a certain period of time, the Cathedral lost its initial function and significance. From the sixteenth century, we only have memorials and donation inscriptions. As a rule, next to the crucifixes, the name of the person who donated a gift to the temple, the reason for commemorating, and sometimes also the year were mentioned. The biggest and the most relevant part of the inscriptions of a construction nature comes from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. During that period, new construction and building works started under the command of Catholicos Movses III Tatevatsi. These activities are reflected both in epigraphic and manuscript sources and archival documents.¹⁵⁸

In this regard, we can mention the construction record of the great western bell tower, founded by Catholicos Philipos I Aghbakets (1633-1655) and built by architect Sahak Hizants. The inscription was first published by Hovhannes Shahkhatunians, who read the text indicating 1654, which all subsequent researchers later repeated.¹⁵⁹ During the examination of the letters, Avetysian noticed that the letters of the date do not say “ՌՃԳ” but “ՌՃԴ”; therefore, the year 1655 [FIG 11]. The year is related to the time when architect Sahak Hizants and his group moved to Etchmiadzin and continued the incomplete construction of the bell tower.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Avetysian 2020, p. 113.

According to a previous study, there are no inscriptions dated prior to the sixteenth century, even among thousands of inscriptions of the Cathedral. Numerous cross-stones that are dated earlier were brought from different regions of Armenia, Artsakh, and Nakhichevan during the reign of Catholicos Vazgen the First. See Harutyunyan 2016, p. 371.

¹⁵⁹ For the bibliography references, see Avetysian, p. 125, note 1.

¹⁶⁰ The whole, corrected version of the construction record in Armenian read:

"Ի ԹԱՊԱՐԱՆՈՐՈՒԹԵԱՆ: ՊԱՐՄԻՑ. ԵԱՀ. ԱՐԱՍԻ: (Ս) ՆԱԵԻ: Ի ՀԱՅՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹԵԱՆ: ՏԵԱՌՆ. ՓԻԼԻՊՈՍԻ: ԹՎԻՆ ՌՃԴ:
(1655) ՀԻՄՆԱՐԿԵՑԱԲ: ԵՖ ՏԵԱՌՆ. ՅԱԿՈԲԱՅ: ՋՈՒՂԱՅԵՑԻ:
ՌԺՁ: (1657) ԱՎԱՐՏԵՑԱԲ: ՋԱՆԿԱԿԱՏՈՒ ՆՍ. ԾԱԽԻԲ
ԱՆՏՈՆ ՊԱՐՈՆ: ՉԷԼԷՊԻՆ: Ի ՓԱՌՍ: ՔՐԻՍՏՈՍԻ. ԱՍՏՈՒԾՈՅ. ՄԵՐՈ:"

Cited from Avetysian 2020, pp. 125-126.

Another reconstruction-related inscription, newly discovered by Avetysian, and dated 1686, was found inside the southern depository in a niche opened in the western wall [FIG 12 a, b]. The wall was closed with brick tiles and a layer of plaster, most likely during the eighteenth century.¹⁶¹

C) Decoration

Apart from its architecture, the Cathedral is famous for its unique design. Beautiful frescoes can be seen in most interior décor, and several ornaments and reliefs are also located on the exterior of the building.

When the new cupola was constructed, it opened numerous ways to the evolution of forms of window jambs, cornices, and various embellishments. For the first time, semicircular archivolt with horizontal wings fixed on the level of the skewbacks of the windows' arches can be seen in this type of building. Various profiles are combined with a wide band of carved ornament. Along with simplified Hellenistic motives, some geometric and floral ones are also known from samples of Sasanian carved stucco. Incredibly close to the Sasanian type is the garland of the eastern archivolt [FIG 13]. The drum on the exterior is decorated with reliefs depicting the bust portraits of the Twelve Apostles and arcade ornaments. According to Kazaryan's reconstruction, the seventh-century tholobate 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 14]. The dome's iconography can be compared with the Cubiculum of the Holy Sepulchre.¹⁶²

The tholobate of the Cathedral became a rare example of the Roman order arcade in the Christian era. In Armenia, the blind arcade decoration became far more widespread since its origin in the architecture of churches created by Catholicos Nerses during the 640s.¹⁶³

There is an interesting detail on the capital of the drum. At first gaze, a hardly noticeable image of a bird-like creature [FIG 15]. It is a relief of a "Senmurv", a creature linked with symbolism of a divine presence and royal patronage. The symbol is of

¹⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 115. The original inscription in Armenian read: "Ի ԹՎԻՆ ՌՃԼԵ".

¹⁶² Kazaryan, Mikayelyan 2020, p. 79.

¹⁶³ Ibidem, p. 81.

Sassanid origin and has a meaning of the victory of the Christian church and the glorification of the Cross. According to Kazaryan and Mikayelyan, it may be one of the first known “Senmurv” in the art of the Christian world.¹⁶⁴

The sculptural decorations that caused a dispute between historians concerning the dating are located on the northern wall. The three stone slabs, with small reliefs and inscriptions, were supposedly preserved from the original ornaments.

The first one depicts two figures divided by the Ionian column in the arcade, with the Greek inscription “ΘΕΚΛΑ, ΠΑΥΛΟΣ” – Saint Thecla and Saint Paul [FIG 16 a, b].¹⁶⁵ On the second are visible three wreaths symbolizing the Holy Trinity. The third relief is an image of a medallion with two doves on each side [FIG 17]. Underneath is a plate with a prayer mentioning the names of the deceased persons – “ΔΑΝΙΗΛ, ΤΙΠΕΡ, ΓΑΡΙΚΙΝΙΣ”.¹⁶⁶

Contrary to what Boré said about the inscriptions, they cannot be used to indicate that Christianity had already found its way into Armenia before Gregory the Illuminator. According to Strzygowski, they instead prove that Greek script and language were still in use in the country after Mesrop Mashtotsh invented the alphabet.¹⁶⁷

It should be noted that apart from these Greek inscriptions on the slabs and Armenian lettering on the piece of pottery [FIG 18] found by Sahinyan and dated to the seventh century, no other ancient text concerning the building itself has been found.

Among the architecture, the Cathedral differs from other Armenian churches by its unique interior mural paintings.¹⁶⁸ They were done between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and showed scenes from the Old Testament, saints, and views of the Cathedral supplemented with various floral and geometric ornaments. From 1712-1721, Naghash Hovnatán created frescoes on the dome and the internal marble of the apse that is preserved until the present. Over the years, several other members of the Hovnatanyan

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem, pp. 80.

¹⁶⁵ Strzygowski 1891, p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ Strzygowski 1891, p. 5. An inscription containing the prayer with the names of the deceased was described already by Dubois and Boré during their travels. See notes 41 and 39.

¹⁶⁷ Strzygowski 1891, p. 9. For the debate of modern scholars, see, for example, Garibian de Vartavan 2009.

¹⁶⁸ For more about inner decoration, see Sahinian, Zarian, Ghazarian 1978, pp. 71-73.

family restored the paintings and created new ones.¹⁶⁹ From the inscriptions found, we also know that Hovnatan Hovnatanyan from Tiflis finished the works during the reign of Catholicos Ghukas Karnets in 1786.¹⁷⁰

The renovations carried out in different centuries, sometimes of low quality from the construction point of view, weakened the stability of the dome-bearing gables and arches and caused dangerous cracks in several parts of the building. All this, as well as the water flowing in from the roof, created a severe danger to the collapse of the dome and the entire structure. From November 1954 to October 1955, major construction works were carried out to strengthen the general structure of the temple and thoroughly reconstruct individual parts. The most significant amount of work was done in the direction of mural painting. As a result of the permanent dampness caused by the flowing water, the murals were not only discolored, but a large part of them disintegrated and fell together with the plaster. For this reason, they were restored along with the museum rooms and the bell tower. The northern and eastern walls were also replaced by new tuff stone. In 1956, the marble covering of the floor was completed.¹⁷¹

D) Summary

To summarize this part of the chapter, scholars are not entirely united in their theories even after many years of research. Several questions concerning the Cathedral's dating have not been resolved adequately until now and probably cannot be until new archeological excavations are done. Addressing the initial phases and appearance of the building is, therefore, not an easy task. Due to the absence of primary sources and the lack of possibilities for new research in situ, historians are left with theorizing based only on the already existing research of their predecessors. Based on written sources and some comparisons with other similar monuments in Armenia and Georgia, I have dated the building to the end of the fifth century, specifically the year 480, built on command of Vahan Mamikonian.

¹⁶⁹ Anonymous 2000, p. 6.

¹⁷⁰ Avetysian 2020, p. 120.

¹⁷¹ Sahynian 1956, p. 61.

3.2 The Story of the Martyrs

The creation of the first martyria and later Church of Saint Hripsime, along with the churches of Saint Gayane and Shoghakat, is connected to the legend written by Agathangelos. According to the story, the virgins Hripsime and Gayane were, together with several other nuns, murdered on the command of King Trdat III. The king later tortured Gregory the Illuminator, who refused to give up his faith, and threw him into a pit full of snakes. After that, the king was punished and turned into a boar. Ultimately, Trdat's sister Khosrovidukht saw a vision where she was told to release Gregory and bury the martyrs. After she did what she was told, Trdat became human again and built churches commemorating the virgins.¹⁷²

Upon that, the court, capital city, and the whole country were converted to Christianity. Gregory and the king began to destroy the pagan temples and, in their place, started building new ones. Gregory was consecrated bishop in Caesarea and put in charge of the Armenian Church.¹⁷³

3.3 The Church of Saint Hripsime

The church of Saint Hripsime is located in the eastern part of the Vagharshapat, and it is usually the first stop for visitors when entering the city [FIG 19]. The martyrium is one of the three sanctuaries built by Saint Gregory the Illuminator in the years following the conversion to Christianity. It is dedicated to the famous Armenian martyr Saint Hripsime whose remains are kept in the crypt under the temple.

A) Architectural context and description

The church was constructed on the remains of a previous fourth-century structure built by Gregory the Illuminator. The design of the building represents the perfect type of a tetraconch with semicircular niches lying on the diagonal axes [FIG 20]. It is dated to the beginning of the seventh century, done under the reign of the Catholicos Komitas. A

¹⁷² Agathangelos 1976, pp. 161-181. For the complete narration of the story, see pp. 147-313.

¹⁷³ Hacikyan 2000, vol. I, p. 121.

crypt has been preserved under the initial structure, which was descended by a staircase and surmounted by a North-Eastern chapel on the upper level.¹⁷⁴

The records about the first building by Saint Gregory come mainly from the text of Agathangelos. This text, however unconventional it may be in some parts, attests to the construction of "chapels raised above the tombs"; that is to say, martyria on two levels, the tomb below and the chapel above. During the plunder of the Persians, around 370, the martyrium was demolished and later restored by Saint Sahak at the beginning of the fifth century. Sahak's church may have replaced the tower-shaped, two-leveled structure depicted on a relief on the east face of the Odzun stele (seventh century).¹⁷⁵

It was not until 618, according to the seventh-century historian, Sebeos, that Komitas (615-628) completely demolished the former dark martyrium and instead built the radiant church of Saint Hripsime, which has remained standing to this day.¹⁷⁶ Along with the construction story, Sebeos reported that Komitas found the crypt with the remains under the old ruins and sealed it with his ring so that no person would open the reliquary. He also provided information about the existence of a wooden roof and its later replacement made from stone.¹⁷⁷

Monuments built during the reign of Komitas exhibit a new way in the evolution of the under-cupola transitional construction. Conical squinches that were unidentified in earlier edifices with precise dating were then established in the church of Hripsime. The church's unique form is an excellent example of a central-domed sanctuary with four apses and intermediate niches. Large squinches can be seen in the corner niches supported by smaller fan squinches [FIG 21 a,b]. A polyhedron formed by them is crowned with a circular cornice.¹⁷⁸ Since the east and west apses are slightly longer and wider compared to the southern and northern ones, they extend the temple's layout.

The recesses on the façade create a visually pleasing chiaroscuro effect [FIG 22 a,b]. They function not only as a particular embellishment but as a support to the building's structure. They "furrow" at the walls in places where their mass would have

¹⁷⁴ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 52.

¹⁷⁵ Khatchatrian 1971, p. 32. The author cites Agathangelos 1862, p. 102, 104.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 32.

¹⁷⁷ Sebeos 1985, p. 99.

¹⁷⁸ Kazaryan, Mikayelyan 2020, p.77.

been excessive, thus providing them with a more homogeneous distribution and increased elasticity. It has been admired for resisting tectonic events, such as frequent earthquakes in the Armenian region. Examples of similar recesses used on the outer walls can be found in many other Armenian churches of the seventh century. Notably in Saint Gevorg in Garnahovit, Saint Hovhannes in Sissian (Sissavan), or Saint Astvatzatzin in Artzvaber.¹⁷⁹

The church's decoration and proportions can be described as simple and elegant. Its façade is clean, and only a small amount of relief decoration is scattered on the exterior walls, flanked around the windows and doors. The reliefs mostly have geometric and floral patterns [FIG 23 a, b, c, d].

From the outside, the church looks solid in its structure. Each of the facades has three levels in the vertical direction. On the eastern wall are two of the total three apse windows. All four facades are dominated by their central niches that end in massive triangular gables under gabled roofs that reach up to the level of the tambour [FIG 24]. The main portal is under the eighteenth-century portico with a belfry [FIG 25].¹⁸⁰ When entering the church, one can notice the change of perspective of the inner space, which has a more central layout customized for accommodating the masses. Three window openings are visible in the slightly elevated eastern apse. Underneath is a slightly elevated bema made of tuff stone. A separate space in the northeast corner is also the entrance to the crypt underneath the apse and a choir.

B) Datation and reconstructions

The earliest illustration of a similar building on the Armenian territory can be seen in the church of Saint Hovhannes in Avan (591-602). The complex plan is demonstrated in a compact wall casing that produces a perfectly quadrangular base on the outside and does not disturb the layout of the inside spaces [FIG 26]. Apart from the central dome-covered area, it consists of four further chapels that occupy the corners of the quadrangular base of the church. In the case of Hripsime, the compact external shape is interrupted by deep dihedral recesses that rise vertically and resolve into conical

¹⁷⁹ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 52.

¹⁸⁰ Kravčíková 2022, p. 114.

squinches.¹⁸¹ Other very comparable examples can be found in the seventh century, Georgian churches of the Holy Cross in Djvari [FIG 27] and the churches of At'eni Sion [FIG 28] and Djveli-Shuamta [FIG 29]. Their plans are characterized by the polygonal external profile of the four apses and the group of four corner chapels.¹⁸²

The church of Hripsime was, according to Strzygowski, a variant of the domed square type, corresponding to the tenth-century Cathedral of Ani. We can notice that even when the buildings share some similarities, they vary in the formation of niches and corner chambers. As Maranci noted, the contrast is also in the form of the central bay since, in Hripsime, the apses are smaller than in the church at Ani, where they occupy sections of the bay's sides.¹⁸³

Despite some later reconstructions, according to T'oramanyan, who drew the first plans of the temple at the beginning of the twentieth century, its form has not fundamentally changed since its foundation in 618.¹⁸⁴ The construction date is attested by the two inscriptions on the west facade and eastern part of the interior, mentioning Catholicos Komitas as responsible for the works. At the same time, they are the most ancient inscriptions written in Armenian that were so far discovered.¹⁸⁵

It should be noted that according to Yeremian's comparative analysis, lunette portals were used during the church's building phases.¹⁸⁶ However, they were later substantially changed, and definite evidence of original solutions did not preserve. Examples of the lunette portals can be found, particularly in the Avan church's western portal, the Zvartnots Temple (641-661), and the Jrvezh Church (seventh century).¹⁸⁷

¹⁸¹ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 52. Kazaryan, on the other hand, does not agree with the Avan comparison. See Kazaryan 2012, p. 295.

¹⁸² Ibidem, p. 54.

¹⁸³ This categorization, among others, was later criticized by modern historians. Maranci noted that this classification based on the development of the domed square does not accommodate the actual material. Therefore, the argument that these two churches should be put into two separate categories is based only on the distinction between the central bay's form and its few-centimeter length difference. According to Maranci, it should not have been a significant reason to separate otherwise similar plans. See Maranci 2001, pp. 109.

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem, p. 109.

¹⁸⁵ Harutyunyan 2016, p. 371.

¹⁸⁶ Yeremian 1955.

¹⁸⁷ Azatyan et al. 2020, p.22.

The debates between scholars sparked primarily due to the question of the origin of the dome. Some consider it to be the original form from the seventh century, while others believe it was restored during the tenth or eleventh centuries.¹⁸⁸

Several epigraphic inscriptions dating from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries were found on the walls of Saint Hripsime. The inscription of 1296 states that the monastery was released from two types of taxes. Another donative one, from 1302, mentions a man named Sargis Koshetsi, who paid 1000 silver coins to be commemorated during the Mass. From these accounts, it can be assumed that the church was actively used during subsequent centuries.¹⁸⁹

Until the seventeenth century, no textual material would confirm any work on the building. In 1653 it was renovated by Catholicos Philip. At the same time, an open narthex was raised in front of the western portal.¹⁹⁰ An inscription was found on the west façade that reads:

“ON THE DATE (1653)
CHRIST'S SERVANT
PHILIPPOS CATHOLICOS OF ALL ARMENIANS
I RENOVATED AGAIN
CHURCH OF HOLY
VIRGINS HRIPSIME AND
GAYANE”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Yeremian 1980, pp. 596-597.

¹⁸⁹ Harutyunyan 2016, p. 372.

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁹¹ “Ի ԹՈՒԻՒՆ ՌՃԲ (1653)

ՔՐԻՍՏՈՍԻ ԾԱՌԱՄԱՅ

ՓԻԼԻՓՊՈՍ ԿԱԹՈՂՈՍԿՈՍ

ԱՄԵՆԱՅՆ ՀԱՅՈՑ

ՎԵՐԱՍԻՆ ՆՈՐՈԳԵՑԻ ԶԵ-

ԿԵՂԵՑԻՍ ՍՐԲՈՑ ԿՈՒՄԱ-

ՆԱՅՆ ՀՈՒՓՍԻՄԵԱՅ ԵՎ

ԳԱՅԻԱՆԵԱՅ” Quoted from: Khalatian 2008, p. 62. Translation to English is mine.

At the same time, a bell tower was built on the narthex, which was finished later in 1790. Other works were done in 1936 when the roof and the dome were renovated. Twenty years later, the inner walls were cleaned from several layers of plaster, which revealed a unique dome support system. In the 60s, the floor in the interior was lowered to the initial level.¹⁹² Archeological excavations done in the 1970s have uncovered the remains of several tortured women buried in the area of the church, which according to Hacikyan, supports the legendary story of Agathangelos.¹⁹³

C) Summary

The initial function of the church of Saint Hripsime was a martyrium. Catholicos Komitas built the current building between 618-621. The date is confirmed by the dedicatory inscription on the western wall and based on similarities in ground plans with other seventh-century Armenian churches.

3.4 The Church of Saint Gayane

In the background of the church's perspective is the magnificent Mount Ararat. The temple lies only a few meters from the Mother Cathedral in the courtyard of Vagharshapat.

A) Architectural context and description

Similar to the church of Hripsime, it was originally surmounted by a chapel and rebuilt at the turn of the fourth century, according to Agathangelos. The present church later replaced the previous temple during the first half of the seventh century, during the time of the Catholicos Ezer (630-641). The contemporary writer, Sebeos, documented the event.¹⁹⁴

The church has a longitudinal, cruciform plan. The octagonal drum lies on four giant free-standing pillars with piers. The structure is divided into three naves, with the

¹⁹² Kravčíková 2022, p. 112.

¹⁹³ Hacikyan 2000, p. 121.

¹⁹⁴ Ter-Movsesian 1907, p. 174.

side ones slightly elevated over the corners. Two square chapels surround the central apse from both sides. It is fully contained within the rectangular perimeter of the walls and rises a few steps above the ground on a bema [FIG 30]. The crypt is located under the apse and can be accessed from the southeast chapel. The plan achieves a complete synthesis between the scheme of the inscribed cross church and the longitudinal basilica.¹⁹⁵

During the formative period of Armenian architecture, the builders focused on combining the functional and symbolic aspects of the previous building types into one complex organism. Church of Saint Gayane which shows a complete fusion between the cross and the rectangle, is a great example of this practice. It demonstrates how the Armenian architects succeeded in combining the dome of the central plan with the barrel vault of the longitudinal plan.¹⁹⁶

The structure will initially strike with its simple yet attractive proportions, which are emphasized by the central dome and the red hue of the stones [FIG 31]. Three portals with tympanums lead into the interior of the church. The main door is accessible through an arched portico, and two other entries are on the north and south sides. As a result of the lowering of the apse, the impression of a central dome has changed. It seems as if it has been shifted to the west.¹⁹⁷

B) Datation and reconstructions

The oldest written evidence about the church's existence comes from the *History of Armenia*, written by tenth-century historian and Catholicos Yovhannes Drasxanakertc'i' (898-929). It is said that the previous chapel from the time of Gregory was completely torn down by the Catholicos Ezer (630-641) and rebuilt into a glorious new church.¹⁹⁸

Unfortunately, no inscription has been found on the building that would confirm the construction date presented by Drasxanakertc'i'. Therefore, the present structure's

¹⁹⁵ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 82-84.

¹⁹⁶ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 82.

¹⁹⁷ Baraničová 2022, p. 103.

¹⁹⁸ Drasxanakertc'i' 1987, pp. 1.

dating is based mainly on written sources and architectural similarities with other seventh-century Armenian churches. However, the year 630 is generally accepted by the majority of scholars.

Strzygowski considered the monument to be typically Armenian. He compared plans of the church of Bagavan [FIG 32] and Tekor Basilica [FIG 33] and concluded that with little additions, they were the possible models for the one in Gayane.¹⁹⁹

We can also see the resemblance in ground plans and architectural shape with other seventh-century monuments. The most striking one is the resemblance between the church of Gayane and the Cathedral of Mren (638-40) [FIG 34], the Cathedral of Odzun (6th-8th c.) [FIG 35], and the church of Tsromi in Georgia (7th c.).²⁰⁰

Studying the plan by N. P. Severov, Georgian art historian G. N. Tschubinaschwili identified a detail that no one addressed before him. Under the small altar window, a semi-circular niche was found. According to the historian, it advocates for the idea of a titular seat placed in it. An example of a similar solution could be detected in the church of Ptghni (6th-7th c.).²⁰¹

In general, the accounts of travelers and historians who visited the church are a valuable source of information about the state of the building during different periods. There is almost no information about the church from the tenth until the early sixteenth century. In the sixteenth century, the dilapidated building, especially its crypt, was partly reconstructed, which was recorded by the contemporary historian Arakel Davrizhetsi.²⁰² From the report, we also know that the overall condition of the whole structure was not good. Its roof and walls were heavily damaged, and the temple was used as a shelter for

¹⁹⁹ Der Nersessian 1947, pp. 73. For Bagavan church see: Strzygowski 1918, pp. 177, 219; Hewsen 1988, pp. 407-408. On Tekor basilica, see Kouymjian 1985, pp. 173-185. See also: Strzygowski 1918, pp. 335-341; Krautheimer 1965, pp. 230.

²⁰⁰ For reference, see Der Nersessian 1947, p. 73; Khalpakhchian 1980, p. 110; Cuneo 1988, p. 28; Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 84; Redgate 2000, p. 162; Maranci 2006, p. 658.

²⁰¹ Baraničová 2020, p. 27. See also Tschubinaschwili 1967, p. 45.

For more about the Ptghni church, see Der Nersessian 1947, p. 60; Mnatsakanyan 1961, pp. 219-237; Donabédian 2008, p. 123; Maranci 2016, p. 23-25.

²⁰² Davrizhetsi 1669.

livestock to survive the cold winters.²⁰³ Eventually, the roof, along with parts of the wall, collapsed.

The most extensive and significant restorations were after that done by Philipos I Aghbakets in 1652-53. During the cleaning of the ruins, the remains of Saint Gayane were also rediscovered. For that reason, a chapel was constructed under the eastern apse along with a new tuff stone bema.²⁰⁴ Catholicos left a valuable inscription about these repairs on the western façade of Saint Hripsime Church.²⁰⁵ During this time, an airy arch portico was added to the west facade, and the space underground became a burial place for the high-ranking Armenian clergy.²⁰⁶

The building underwent several repairs over the years, mainly of a minor nature, that did not change the overall appearance. The obvious exception is the narthex [FIG 35] dedicated to the Apostles Peter and Paul, a later addition done in 1683 during the reign of Catholicos Yeghiazar I of Aintab (1681-1691).²⁰⁷ A similar architectural disposition but with the original narthex can be found in Tsromi.²⁰⁸

c) Decoration

The first impression of the building is very harmonious. Its proportions are simple and elegant, underlined by the captivating color of the red tuff stones. Only a few reliefs decorate the exterior, notably on the slanted edges of the doors and arches of the windows. The decoration is similar to other monuments dating back to the seventh century. The vine rinceau pattern motif is prominent, along with geometric, floret, and palmette ones along the northern portal. The south gate is designed with the rank of hearts on its edges, the pattern also known from the Sassanid ornamentation [FIG 36].²⁰⁹ Several small

²⁰³ Khanlaryan 1978, p. 180.

²⁰⁴ Khanlaryan 1978, p. 59. See also Alishan 1890, p. 242.

²⁰⁵ See p. 55, note 191.

²⁰⁶ Anonymous 2000, p. 5.

²⁰⁷ Lynch 1901, p. 270.

²⁰⁸ Donabédian 2008, p. 107. For more about church of Tsromi, see Tschubinaschwili 1969.

²⁰⁹ Donabédian Thierry 1989, p. 158.

images of crosses and some letters, probably engraved by the two different masons who worked on the site, are scattered on the block of stones around the façade.²¹⁰

A view of the external walls, along with comparing numerous analogies of the sculptural decoration of Saint Gayane with the decoration of other monuments dated from 630-640, indicates that large horseshoe arches might have been part of the outer embellishments. A similar example can be found in the Cathedral of Mren or the church of Saint John in Mastara, both dated to the seventh century.²¹¹ However, we can also propose the possibility of the notched cornices, as was used in Bagavan (631-639) and Bagaran (624-631) temples.²¹²

Striking detail, almost invisible by a quick look, is the carved sundial in the corner of the narthex [FIG 37]. According to Maranci, it was added before the construction of the narthex. Although its simple “scratch-dial” format does not itself indicate one date or another, its location just adjacent to the southern projection of the western narthex renders the device, at present, useless for over half the sunlight hours.²¹³

During the seventeenth century, the narthex was decorated with several frescoes bearing images of Saints Peter and Paul and the donator, Catholicos Yeghiazar. Above the central portal is the scene of The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple [FIG 38]. The Crucifixion of Jesus [FIG 39] is illustrated on the northern wall, and on the south are two angels with Jesus.²¹⁴

The church’s interior is very simple in decoration, almost ascetic, which also underlines its function as martyrium. There are no preserved murals that would suggest that the walls were previously painted. Noticeable are only little remnants of red and white paint found on the squinches, creating an image of a fan [FIG 40 a, b]. Since the interior has been washed several times during renovation works and only small fragments of color are preserved, we can only theorize about the original look of the inner decoration.

D) Summary

²¹⁰ Baraničová 2020, p. 25.

²¹¹ Maranci 2001, pp. 136, 231.

²¹² Baraničová 2022, p. 106. See also Kazaryan 2012, p. 145. For more about the erection of the church of Bagavan, see Strzygowski 1918, pp. 177, 219; Hewsen 1988, pp. 407-408.

²¹³ Maranci 2014, p. 564.

²¹⁴ Khalatian 2008, pp. 71-72.

To sum up, we can say that the church is one of the finest examples of Armenian architecture that combines elements of a three-aisle basilica with a central dome. The church served primarily as a martyrium. No inscriptions clarifying the foundation of the church were found. Based on the written sources and comparison of the ground plans of several other Armenian church buildings, we dated the current structure to the year 630, as the majority of scholars agreed.

3.5 The Church of Saint Shoghakat

The initial church of Saint Shoghakat was built on the site of an early chapel, probably during the same time as the churches of Hripsime and Gayane. The legend by Agathangelos reported about the third site where all of the companions of the two nuns were killed and buried, and a chapel was later built. It is assumed that the third place was in the location of the current Saint Shoghakat church [FIG 41]. Unfortunately, no traces of the previous structure survived. The lack of architectural excavations does not make it possible for scholars to study the previous structure properly.

A small single-aisle chapel dated from the fifth to sixth century was discovered near the building [FIG 42]. The remnants of it were found in the area between the present-day church of Saint Shoghakat and the Ethnographic Museum in Vagharshapat during the archeological excavations in 1979.²¹⁵ It was possibly built in memory of Vardan Mamikonian, who died in the battle of Avarayr in 451.²¹⁶ The layout of the chapel is compared to the crypt of Saint Hripsime.²¹⁷

A) The building of 1694

The current building was constructed in 1694 by Prince Aghamal Shorotetsi. It is located around a hundred meters away from the church of Saint Hripsime. Its diameters are relatively small, made from red and brown tuff stones.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Harutyunyan 2016, p. 373.

²¹⁶ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 100.

²¹⁷ Khatchatrian 1971, p. 37.

²¹⁸ Strzygowski 1918, pp. 188-189.

The characteristic of its plan is that it is markedly elongated along the church's east-west axis. Four pilasters along the side walls in the central part carry the octagonal drum of the dome, which from the outside part, presents the pinnacled roof. The perfect rectangle of the wall structure incorporates within its bulk the semicircular, oblong apse flanked by two smaller rectangular spaces. The earliest example of a similar type of structure is the church of Peter and Paul (Poghos-Petros) in Zovuni (4th-5th c.). The church belongs to the category of buildings with dome-covered halls. One of the earliest examples of this type of "dome-covered hall", originally built as such, is the church of Ptghni (6th-7th c.), representing splendid proof of the new architectural orientation.²¹⁹

B) Summary

Due to no architectural excavations that would reveal the essential structure of the building that stood in the place of the current church of Saint Shoghakat, it is impossible to study it more.

Conclusion

Having made Christianity its official religion at the beginning of the fourth century, Armenia very early developed its architecture in service of the new religion. Armenian architecture gives a prominent place to the vault, especially the dome, built mostly from volcanic stones such as tuff and basalt.²²⁰ Based on the available written sources and excavations, we dated the buildings accordingly.

These monuments function as physical testimony, presenting an unexpected window into one of the most turbulent eras in history. Through their epigraphy, relief sculpture, and architecture, they served as agents in a time of war: affirming alliances, reifying power structures, and transforming complex political and social authority networks into material presences in the landscape.²²¹ They were built to be used during the weekly offices, for penitents, as martyria to venerate the famous Armenian saints, and as an additional space to be used during major feasts.

²¹⁹ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, pp. 104-105.

²²⁰ Donabédian 2013, p. 347.

²²¹ Maranci 2006, p. 657.

Unfortunately, the archaeological data confirming the written sources are far from complete because it is practically impossible to verify the excavations of Sahinyan in situ since the sacred place is active. In any case, the fact is that the churches and especially the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin played a crucial role in the development of the central domes type of churches in the Armenian territory. The churches have been recognized and listed on the *UNESCO World Heritage Site* since 2000.

4 The city of Etchmiadzin

Before proceeding with the history and hypothetical reconstruction of the medieval city, some of the earliest testaments mentioning the churches and the area need to be presented. Therefore, the first part of the chapter will exhibit the earliest Armenian chronicles found during this research.

The second subchapter introduces the city of Vagharshapat (Etchmiadzin). The main attention will be paid to the events that accompanied its foundation, the further development, as well as the role that the urban area played after the Christianization of the country. I focused on the period of the fourth century in order to understand the structure of the first settlements and to serve as a base for the next chapter.

4.1 Chronicles

The oldest historical testimony linked to the foundation of the Cathedral in the city goes back to the second half of the fifth century and was brought to us in the form of a vision attributed, by the fifth-century historian Agathangelos, to Saint Gregory the Illuminator.²²² There are several editions of Agathangelos' text. For this purpose, we

²²²*Agathangelos, History of the Armenians*, Translation and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson, New York 1976. This edition is the first English translation of the original Armenian version. The only other complete translation is into Italian, done in 1843. It used a text edited in 1835 and based on only seven manuscripts preserved in Venice. This same version was later used in the incomplete French translation from 1867. Surprisingly, Thomson's text was not based on the critical edition of Tiflis, published in 1909, but on the Lukasian re-edition of the same. See Schütz, E., "Review of *Agathangelos: History of the Armenians*, by R. W. Thomson", in: *Journal of Asian History*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1978), pp. 172–73.

chose Thomson's translation. It is based on a critical study and comparison of the many surviving Armenian manuscripts. The overall presentation of the text is suitable for scholars as well as for non-specialists, as it is an analogy with the original.²²³

According to the text, ancient Etchmiadzin was surrounded by a wall; in the middle of the city, it had a fortress (citadel), where the palace and the main temple were located.²²⁴ Agathangelos later described events after the creation of the patriarchal church and the martyrdom of the saints. Saint Gregory, King Trdat III, along with people, went

Despite the fact, that we are not able to strictly date the original text, it was accepted by historians to be written around the 5th century. The problem of identifying the author and setting the exact date of the creation of the book is still a topic of debate even today. The name Agathangelos is presumptively a pseudonym. Another issue is that Agathangelos presented himself as Tiridates' contemporary. But the *History* was written after the conversion. For a further discussion on this problem see: Hacikyan, A., J., et al., *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the oral tradition to the Golden Age, vol. I*, Detroit 2000, p. 118; Agathangelos 1976, Introduction, npp.

For the narration of the story of the saints Gayane and Hripsime, see: Agathangelos 1976, pp. 147-313.

²²³ For the Armenian version, see Agathangelos, *Պատմություն հայոց* [History of Armenia, in Armenian] Yerevan 1977.

On the various versions of Agathangelos see G. Garitte, *Documents pour l'étude du livre d'Agathange*, Studi e Testi, 127; Città del Vaticano 1946; Lafontaine, G., *La version grecque ancienne du livre arménien d'Agathange* (Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain 7), Louvain-la-Neuve 1973; Ter-Ghevondian, A., N., “Ագաթանգեղոսի արաբական խմբագրության նորահայտ ամբողջական բնագիրը” [The Newly Discovered Complete Text of the Arabic Version of Agathangelos, in Armenian], in: *Պատմա-բանասիրական հանդես* [Historic and Philological Journal, in Armenian] 60.1 (1973), pp. 209-237; G. Winkler, “Our Present Knowledge of the History of Agat'angelos and Its Oriental Versions,” *Revue des études arméniennes*, 14 (1980), pp. 125-141; R.W. Thomson, *The Lives of Saint Gregory: The Armenian, Greek, Arabic, and Syriac Versions of the History Attributed to Agathangelos*, Ann Arbor, 2010; Grigoryan, V., “Ագաթանգեղոսի «Հայոց պատմությունը» և Հայաստանի վաղ միջնադարի ճարտարապետության ուսումնասիրության խնդիրները” [“History of Armenians” by Agathangelos and the problems of studying the architecture of the early medieval period in Armenia, in Armenian], in *Պատմա-բանասիրական հանդես* [Historical-philosophical magazine, in Armenian], No. 1 (2012), pp. 14-37.

For hagiographical work about Agathangelos and the life of Saint Gregory, see Efthymiadis, S., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography: Volume 1: Periods and Places*, Surrey 2011, pp. 303-306. See also: Jamkochian, S., H., “Житие св. Григория просветителя Армении по арабской синайской рукописи 455” [The Life of St. Gregory the Illuminator of Armenia in Ms. Sin. Ar. 455, in Russian], in *Гитутюн* [Gitutyun, in Russian] (Yerevan 2016), p. 320.

²²⁴ Common theory of historians, when referring to the localization of the city center, is that it was placed in the area of the present Mother Cathedral. See: Mkhitarayan, A., *Վաղարշապատ քաղաքանայր Հայաստանի* [Vagharshapat, the capital of Armenia, in Armenian], Vagharshapat 1874, p. 61.; Alishan, G., *Այրարատ, Բնաշխարհի Հայաստանեայց* [Ayarat, Armenian Nature World, in Armenian], Venice 1890, p. 205; Shahkhatunians, H., *Ստորագրություն Կաթողիկոսի Էջմիածնի և հինգ զաւու-ռսցն Արարատայ* [Signature of the Catholicos of Etchmiadzin and the five governors of Ararat, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 2014, p. 59.

to the place where the fiery column with the golden base had been revealed, and there they enclosed the spot with a high wall and secured it with doors and bolts. The sign of the saving cross was set up in that spot so that everyone might come to venerate God. The sacred place indicated in the vision was the city of Vagharshapat, the light that shone from the column was the sign of divine power, surrounding the sacred place with a wall signified raising it to the level of a holy city. The author later says how on the dome of the central nucleus of the church, he saw a place of gathering of the community of the heavenly kingdom. The parallelism used underlines the analogy between a heavenly city and the terrestrial city, which should have been, according to this concept, an instrument for social and moral order.²²⁵

The second controversial author of the fifth century was P' avstos Buzand.²²⁶ Like his predecessor Agathangelos, he also wrote a *History of the Armenians*.²²⁷ Unlike Agathangelos, he recognized secular history as more than just a vehicle of opportunity for narrating religious history. Both had the same importance.²²⁸

According to his chronicle, the original church built in the place of Etchmiadzin was initially called the “Great Church”. The title “Mother Church” was attributed to the most important area of worship, which was reserved for the building constructed at Ashtishat after the demolition of the three temples devoted to the ancient pagan gods – Aramazd, Anahit, and Vahagn. Only towards the end of the fourth century was the Church of Etchmiadzin referred to as the “Mother Church”, an appellation it has until today.²²⁹ As reported by the historian, the city was almost entirely ruined during the invasion of the Sasanian king Shapur II in the second half of the fourth century.²³⁰

²²⁵ Zarian, A., Zarian, A., Ter Minassian, A., “Vagharshapat: Edjmiatzin, Hrip'simè, Gayanè, Shoghakat”, in: *Documenti di architettura armena/Documents of Armenian Architecture* 23, Venice (1998), p. 14.

²²⁶ Hacikyan, A., J., et al., *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the oral tradition to the Golden Age*, vol. I, Detroit 2000, p. 183.

²²⁷ Buzand, P., *Պատմություն Հայոց* [History of Armenians, in Armenian], Yerevan 1968.

²²⁸ Hacikyan 2000, vol. I, p. 185.

²²⁹ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p.17

²³⁰ For the references, see Sahinyan, A. “Էջմիածնի Մայր տաճարի սկզբնական տեսքը” [The original view of Etchmiadzin Cathedral, in Armenian], in: *Patma-Banasirakan Handes*, 3 (1966), p. 72; Hewsens, R., "The Monastery of Ējmiatsin", in: *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, Chicago 2001, p. 259; Hasratyan, M., "Էջմիածնի Մայր տաճարի ճարտարապետությունը Ղազար Փարպեցու օրոք" [The Architecture of

The controversy about Buzand arose from the lack of autobiographical material in his book, which led some scholars to speculate about his identity and reliability. Initially, there were speculations that he was Greek or Syrian, who wrote in the fourth century, possibly in Greek or Syriac, and was only later translated into Armenian during the fifth century. Today, given existing research, scholarly opinion accepts that the *History of the Armenians* was created in the second half of the fifth century by an Armenian author who may have taken the name P'avstos Buzand. Although this work was for a long time deemed an unreliable source, in the nineteenth century, the French academic Antoine Saint-Martin (1791-1832) and the German orientalist Alfred Gutschmidt (1831-1887) studied the question most thoroughly. They came up with the conclusion that it certainly is a relevant source for Armenian studies.²³¹

Buzand's work has influenced many historians coming after him. One of his contemporaries, Ghazar P'arpetsi, stated in the *History* that only two chronicles of Armenia had been written before his: those of Agathangelos and P'avstos Buzand. Therefore, he considered himself the third chronicler. Since we have a generous amount of written evidence from the time of P'arpetsi's writing, we do not have to question the credibility of this statement.²³²

What is known about the process of his work is that Vahan Mamikonian, a *marzban* (governor) of Persian Armenia, was familiar with the texts of the earlier historians. He allegedly supported and asked P'arpetsi to continue documenting the country's history from the point where Buzand had stopped. P'arpetsi could not have started writing it before 493, the probable date of his return from Amida. Accordingly, the work must have been completed in the last few years of the fifth century.²³³

P'arpetsi reported on the dilapidated state of the Etchmiadzin Cathedral.²³⁴ In his words, before being named a *marzban*, Mamikonian went to the city of Vagharshapat after a triumphant battle against the Persians (483). He rebuilt and restored the church

Etchmiadzin Cathedral in the Time of Lazarus P'arpetsi, in Armenian], in: *Patma-Banasirakan Handes*, 2 (2003) p. 267.

²³¹ Hacikyan 2000, vol. I, p. 184.

²³² Ibidem, vol. I, p. 183. See P'arpeci, L., *The History of Lazar P'arpeci*, Translation and Commentary by Robert W. Thompson, Leuven 1991.

²³³ Hacikyan 2000, vol. I, p. 215.

²³⁴ Hasratyan 2003, p. 269.

from its foundations and brought back its glory. According to Samuel Anetsi (12th c.), he also repaired the three martyria.²³⁵

An additional portrayal of the Cathedral's foundation was documented in Moses Khorenatsi's *History of the Armenians*.²³⁶ Since the author did not continue the story after reaching the year 440, it was usually dated to the second half of the fifth century, specifically to the years between 460 and 480. To a large extent, it still is the traditional view of life and the work of Khorenats'i which has been agreed upon by Armenian scholars. Nevertheless, this accustomed and unquestioned analysis faced severe criticism over the past century.²³⁷ One of the reasons for skepticism is the earliest literary reference to Khorenats'i, which Catholicos Yovhannes Draxanakertc'i made in his book *History of Armenia*, written in the third decade of the tenth century.²³⁸

Khorenats'i gained the attention of Western historians mainly in the early eighteenth century, soon after the first Armenian printed version of the *History* appeared in Amsterdam in 1695.²³⁹ Even though its historical accuracy might be questioned, it became a tool to promote an increased sense of national identity among Armenians. As Hacikyan later wrote, it was "a work that has forged a national consciousness, consolidated a historical and cultural awareness, and inspired an irresistible urge for survival in an afflicted people."²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Zarian, Zarian, Ter Minassian 1998, p. 30.

For more about Samuel Anetsi, see Matevosyan, K., *ՍՄՄՎԵԼ ԿՆԵՑՈՒ ՄԱՍՆԵՐԻ ԲԱՆԱԿՆԵՐԻ ԵՎ ՆՈՐԱՀԱՅՏ ԼՐԱՑՈՒՄՆԵՐ* [*The Manuscripts and Newly Discovered Additions of Samvel Anetsi's Chronicles*, in Armenian], Yerevan 2009.

²³⁶ Khorenats'i, M., *Պատմություն Հայոց* [History of the Armenians in Armenian], M. Abelean, S. Yarul'iwnean, and St. Malxaseanc' (eds.), Tiflis, 1913.

²³⁷ Sarkissian, A., O., "On the 'Authenticity of Moses of Khoren's History'", in: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 60, no. 1 (March 1940), p. 74.

The problem with the work of Khorenats'i is that it does reference some people and sources which were not available in Armenian in the 5th century. For this reason, some historians, notably Robert Thomson, consider Moses to have lived as late as the 8th century, a proposition usually rejected by Armenian historians. See Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, Translation and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1978.

²³⁸ Sarkissian 1940, p. 73.

See: Yovhannes Draxanakertc'i, *History of Armenia*, Translation and Commentary by Rev. Krikor H. Maksoudian, Scholars Press Atlanta, Georgia 1987.

²³⁹ Hacikyan 2000, vol. I, p. 308.

²⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 310.

To conclude this part, we might say that the first Armenian historians were questionable figures. Agathangelos has been perceived as the good messenger who narrated the story of the conversion of Armenia to Christianity. Pavstos Buzand chronicled the conflict between church and state in the fourth century. Khorenats'i gave the first comprehensive history of Armenia from its origins to the time of Mashtots. However, the question remains, who were they? Later traditions provide elaborate details. But we have no other reliable information from their contemporaries, and the claims to have been eyewitnesses of the events cannot automatically be taken at face value. In any event, there was no proven writing in Armenian before Mashtots; and no compositions by Armenians in Greek or Syriac are attested.²⁴¹ Nevertheless, the chronicles cannot and should not be omitted if we aim to reconstruct the image of the medieval city of Etchmiadzin.

4.2 A brief look at the first settlements

Inscriptions from the founding period of the city have not survived. The earliest mention of the city under the name Vagharshapat comes from Khorenats'i. He reported that the town of *Vardges* was conquered by the Persians at the beginning of the first century, and the area was rebuilt by King Vagharsh the First (117-144), who named it *Vagharshapat*. Based on this record, many researchers accepted the hypothesis that Vagharsh the First founded the city and established a court in it.²⁴² Even when there is no actual proof that Vagharsh actually established a whole new city, we can accept the idea that his contribution to the area was important enough since it bears his name.²⁴³

In 163, it was declared the capital of Armenia by the Romans, who established a military station in the area and renamed it Kainepolis, meaning “New city”. The Romans erected several buildings that are characteristic of capital, such as palace complexes, the temple of Anahit inside the citadel, and the temple of Apollo outside of the city’s wall. It

²⁴¹ Hovannisian, R., *The Armenian people from ancient to modern times*, vol. 1, London 1997, p. 209.

²⁴² Khachatryan 2014, p. 30. For the opinions of other researchers, see, for example, Sardaryan 1975, pp. 52-65; Tiratsyan 1977, p. 81.

²⁴³ The word Vagharshapat refers to the name of the city. The word can be divided into two parts. “Vagharsh” is the name, and “apat”, means wall.

became the second political and religious center after Artashat, and its function remained until the country lost its independence.²⁴⁴ The city got its previous name back during the reign of Vagharsh II (192/193-211) after the Romans left Armenia.²⁴⁵

4.3 The city during the Late Antiquity

The accession of Trdat the Great to the Armenian throne in 298 or 299 followed dramatic events as Rome and Sasanian Persia fought for power. The king established his capital at Vagharshapat and made a decision to withdraw from the political influence of the Sasanian empire. One of the most important acts by Trdat was the acceptance of Christianity as a state religion. The conversion was mostly by Sasanians under Hormizd II and his successor, Shapur II, seen as a betrayal and as possible danger of ruining their own political interests. That perception has often led to rebellion against the government and the church. On the contrary, the Roman emperor Diocletian (284-304) tolerated Trdat's determination to utilize the transition from a polytheistic to a monotheistic religious order to gain further political and economic influence. Due to that, the pagan temples were ordered to be destroyed, and new Christian buildings were erected in their place.²⁴⁶ In the capital, the temple of Anahit was replaced by the Cathedral, which became the seat of the Catholicos. In the years after the end of Trdat's reign, the country faced several conflicts, which eventually led to changes in the political and religious structures. The capital was demolished, and the patriarchal residence was in the fifth century relocated to Dvin by Catholicos Hovhannes I Mandakuni.²⁴⁷

Despite many turbulent times for the country that followed and which affected the state of the churches during various invasions and changes of the Empires, the city prevailed. The Catholicosate finally returned back to Vagharshapat in 1441, and the churches were repaired.²⁴⁸ The city kept its significance as a spiritual center, mostly

²⁴⁴ Tiratsyan 1977, p.81. See also Khachatryan 2014, pp. 36-37.

²⁴⁵ Khachatryan 2014, p. 53.

²⁴⁶ Payaslian, 2007, pp. 34-36.

²⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 44.

²⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 104.

thanks to the martyria of the famous Roman virgins and their relation to the legendary story of Agathangelos.

4.4 The archeological research and the possible reconstruction of the city

On the bases of written sources and archaeological research, an attempt was made to reconstruct the initial location of the city and the principles of urban development. It is assumed that, similar to other cities, Vagharshapat also had a citadel, a functional urban area, and an agricultural zone.²⁴⁹

Questions concerned with the urban structure and plans of the city were, in most cases, overlooked by scholars. The first systematic archaeological initiative to study the city and its adjacent area took place in 1930 by a group of famous Armenian geographers and archeologists, including Marr, Yeremian, Kalantar, and T'oramanyan. The archaeological significance of Vagharshapat has been known for some time because of the occasional discovery of Greek and Latin inscriptions in the region. The research focused on addressing a series of questions regarding the impact of Roman activity in the East, particularly with respect to the development of trade relations and social structures.²⁵⁰

One of the significant outcomes of the study has been a systematic, multicomponent investigation that included a geodesic survey producing a 100 m² grid of the entire Zvartnots Archaeological Region. Ironically, the whole project also demonstrated the common failure to achieve solid continuous research of the classical sites in the area since the work lasted only one season, despite the plan for its continuation. One wonders whether the variety of theoretical perspectives of those involved may have created obstacles that could not have been overcome. After that, the study of classical sites in Armenia did not resume for nearly two decades.²⁵¹

In the northeastern part of the city, several burial places were found during the excavation works in the first half of the twentieth century. In general, more than five

²⁴⁹ See Kalantar 1935, pp. 53-54; Sahinyan 1956, pp. 60-69; Tiratsyan 1977, pp. 81-82.

²⁵⁰ Khatchadourian 2008, p. 262.

²⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 263.

different types of tombs have been found. Small, oblong-shaped slabs of tufa stones planted directly to the ground, with the upper end barely visible and leveled with the ground, were discovered directly opposite the Church of Saint Hripsime. In 1930, several graves were opened, and they are considered to be a mix of Pagan-Christian tombs [FIG 43 a, b, c]. Different long, box-shaped ones were located next to Hripsime. They were formed by side-by-side slabs and covered with the same type of clay on top. Other graves were simple in their form, set in the ground with slabs sticking above. Numerous pieces of jewelry and decorations from carnelian, ruby, glass, silver, and bronze were found inside. In one of the graves, a silver-plated, copper Roman coin was found. Even when preserved in a bad state, in Khalantar's opinion, it belonged to either Roman Emperor Vespasian or Titus in 69 or 71 AD.²⁵² The coin serves as a good medium for the initial dating of the ancient burial ground. In any case, it dates from the first century. Therefore, if the graves are contemporary with it, we can link them with the settlements that preceded the city.²⁵³

Notable findings were the clay sarcophagi [FIG 44 a, b]. They were covered with three clay slabs, on which was carved an equilateral cross (length: 160-192 cm, width: 50-52 cm at the head, 30-32 cm at the feet). Most of the corpses were buried in a supine position (lying on their backs with their legs folded). The bodies were directed to the east-west, with the head on the west side. Based on the position of the corpses and the accompanying materials, they can be dated to the fourth to the fifth century. According to Kalantar, not only do they generally correspond to the Roman period, but for the most part, by their type and origin, they can be recognized as Greco-Roman as a similarity or a direct Roman production. The tombs also belong to the fourth to fifth centuries based on their form and accompanying materials.²⁵⁴ Tiratsyan dated them to the same period, also based on the finding of several flacons made of thin glass with an octagonal body and a long neck with a star-shaped imprint on its bottom. Polyhedral vessels were typical of the early medieval glass produced in Armenia.²⁵⁵ What can be deduced from these findings is that the city, and especially the area around Saint Hripsime, was used for

²⁵² Kalantar 1935, pp. 37-39. See also Khachatryan 2014, p. 40.

²⁵³ Tiratsyan 1977, p. 93.

²⁵⁴ Ibidem, pp. 40-43 and 51. See also Khachatryan 2014, p. 41.

²⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 95.

burials since the fourth century and probably even before. Based on the sarcophagi and the gold and precious stones found inside, most likely for high-profile figures. We might suggest that when Saint Hripsime was buried in the area, the location was already used for that purpose.

Even when I previously mentioned the accounts of chronicles as not always historically accurate, these reports, along with the available data from archeological works and topographical plans by A. Grigoryan [FIG 45], can be beneficial when forming a hypothesis about the initial position and the structure of the medieval city.²⁵⁶

From the stories of Agathangelos, one can learn the following about the city. The area was surrounded by a defensive wall that had several gates, known are the Eastern and Southern. The Chronicle reports that Gayane was taken out of the city through the southern gate to the main road leading to the Metsamor bridge and was killed there, in a swampy place, near the moat that encircled the city. On the site where she was killed, a chapel was built.²⁵⁷

Inside the city, there was a citadel – a fortress where the royal palace was located (the current place of the Cathedral). The complex had, according to the text, its own internal streets, which might indicate the presence of other buildings. Although Agathangelos speaks of a city fortress, based on topographic conditions (lack of any elevation) and also judging by the central position of the fortress in the city itself, it is more plausible that it was a citadel. Nevertheless, it is debatable if the mentioned citadel coincided with the current area occupied by the monastery. Agathangelos reported that the flat territory of the city had no natural means of protection. There was only a swamp surrounding the chapel of Gayane. Therefore, the fortress, or the citadel, had to be surrounded by a defensive wall.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ While reconstructing the possible location and look of the city, I used the ground plans that were available to me during this research. They were presented during the historical and cultural substantiation project of the city of Echmiadzin in 1980. Unfortunately, the only original archeological report available to me was the one of Kalantar. Therefore, the majority of information concerned with the findings is from him. See Kalantar, A., *Հին Վաղարշապատի պեղումներ. (Զարտեգներ, պլաններ, նկարներ)* [Excavations of Old Vagharshapat (Maps, plans, pictures.), in Armenian] Yerevan 1935.

²⁵⁷ Ter-Ghevondyan 1983, p. 302, 311; See also Tiratsyan 1997, p. 89.

²⁵⁸ Ter-Ghevondyan 1983, notably pp. 178, 180, 192, 248, 279., See also Tiratsyan 1977, pp. 82-83.

This statement can be supported by the two Latin inscriptions of 175 and 185 that were found during the excavations. Plausibly it was the Romans who built a fortress with a rectangular plan and quadrangular towers in order to house the legions. Or possibly just rebuild the already existing structure.²⁵⁹ A similar example of a rectangular plan of the palace and temple fortified complex can be found in the center of the Mesopotamian city of Hatra from the first century BC, nowadays located in the area of northern Iraq.²⁶⁰ Another case was the city of Firuzabad, founded by Ardashi I (224-241). The difference is in a plan which was circular, but what can be compared is the tower with a fire altar in its center.²⁶¹

To locate the royal palace mentioned in the chronicle, we have to take a look at the existing evidence that might suggest more about its possible setting in the city.

During restoration work in the Cathedral and especially under its floor, the remains of a pre-Christian, pagan temple were found. It consisted of several marble stones, burnt brick remains, and a floor covered with multi-colored stones, possibly fragments of mosaic. At the same time, it is especially noteworthy that in 1931, the ancient bathhouse from the second century was found on the western side of Etchmiadzin printing house, which proves once again that there was a Roman fortress with a palace inside the area. Unfortunately, the nature of that structure was not understood at the time as it was considered to be a remnant of a previous workshop and was not fully studied. It was only after the publication of the materials of the existence of the ancient Garni bath that researchers recognized it as well.²⁶² By analogy with the stones from Garni (from the defensive wall and the ancient temple) with the stones that have been preserved, Tiratsyan dated it to the first centuries AD.²⁶³

The pagan temple in the citadel of Vagharshapat suffered the same fate as most pagan temples of ancient Armenia. The new religion replaced the old one, and the first Christian churches were constructed on their site.

²⁵⁹ Khachatryan 2014, p. 42.

²⁶⁰ For the biblio about Hatra, see Andrae, W., *Hatra nach aufnahmen von mitgliedern der Assur-expedition der Deutschen Orient-gesellschaft*, Leipzig 1912.

²⁶¹ Khachatryan 1971, p. 17.

²⁶² Khachatryan 2014, p. 43.

²⁶³ Tiratsyan 1977, p.84

To sum up, what can be said about the look of the city and the position of the first Christian chapels that preceded the churches of Saint Hripsime, Gayane, and Shoghakat during the time between the third and the fourth century, is the following:

The palace and the pagan temple stood in the place of the current Cathedral, sheltered in the center of a citadel or a certain fortification structure. The complex was at the same time surrounded by a multifaceted wall. The city was accessible through two gates from south and east. The other chapels were established *extra muros*.²⁶⁴ Saint Gayane's chapel, or a martyrium, was built in the place where she was killed. Therefore, not far from the southern walls of the city. The excavations of many burial places have documented that the necropolis was located far to the east of the city walls and spread to the area around the temple of Hripsime – this may be seen as a testimony of very well-known practice in the Roman empire to bury martyrs in a common necropolis outside the walls. Their presence will, however, in a second oment attract sepulchers “*ad sanctos*”.²⁶⁵

4.5 Summary

The chapter aimed to examine the literary sources that came down to us in the form of several chronicles, possibly from the fifth century. The pieces of information on the churches and the subsequent are that were provided by these writers, notably Agathangelos, whether historically accurate or not, served as a base for creating a hypothetical image of the city. First, I have tried to briefly summarize the role that the city played before and after the conversion to Christianity in 301. Based on the literary sources and available archeological reports from the site, I have tried to reconstruct the possible position of the palace and the citadel that was built on the site of the city of

²⁶⁴ Brenk, B., “Il Culto delle reliquie e la politica urbanistico-architettonica di Milano ai tempi del vescovo Ambrogio”, in *387 d.c. Ambrogio e Agostino. Le sorgenti dell'Europa*, Milano 2003, pp. 56-60; Krautheimer, R., *Three Christian Capitals: Topography and Politics*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1983.

²⁶⁵ On this practice, see for example, Ebanista, C., “Le sepolture vescovili ad sanctos: i casi di Cimitile e Napoli”, in: *Aristocrazie e società fra transizione romano-germanica e altomedioevo*, (2015) p. 47-80; Dresken-Weiland, J., “Christian Sarcophagi from Rome”, in: *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* Routledge, R. M. Jensen, M. D. Ellison, UK 2018, pp. 39-50.

Vagharshapat. Thanks to archeological findings and the several burial places, it is possible to say with certainty that the site with the initial structure of the city was already active in the second century.

Very soon after its construction, the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin acquired a dominant role in the spiritual life of Armenia. The pagan temple dedicated to the goddess Anahit-Artemis, which stood in its place, was completely destroyed in the comfort of Christianity. It seems that the spread of legends, therefore the oral tradition played a very significant role in this case, and the area became a famous place of worship.

5 On the Road to Etchmiadzin

In the previous chapter, we described the architecture of the churches and the topography of the ancient city. Based on existent archeological evidence available to us, we also reconstructed the ancient Vagharshapat, located the position of the first pagan chapels – temples that preceded the later churches of Saint Gayane, Hripsime, Shoghakat, and the Mother Cathedral.

Therefore, the next and last step in this study is to explore further the function of the churches and especially the reason for their position and connection to the city during the seventh century, when they were constructed. As we know already, the churches were initially built as martyria chapels and later rebuilt into current structures on the site of previous pagan temples. Our goal will be to present arguments about why the specific location was used.

5.1 On the Armenian creation of the concept of Jerusalem

Among the significant number of churches erected throughout the Middle Ages to resemble a highly venerated prototype, one group is particularly relevant for establishing the nature of a medieval copy: the imitations of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. Despite the aim to imitate the Holy Sepulchre, the buildings vary not only from each other but also from the prototype which they mean to follow. They exist not

only in great numbers but also rely upon a model, which is in its form preserved until now.²⁶⁶

In this part, I will present arguments that the case of a similar replica was used in Armenia when building the churches in Etchmiadzin and that they were explicitly placed in the position to resemble the structure in Jerusalem.²⁶⁷

To further initiate the theory, we must first look at the topic of the liturgy. A close relationship existed between the theological conceptions of Jerusalem and the organization of sacred space in Armenia. According to historical information, the first Armenian translations of the Scriptures were followed by the reorganization of the Armenian liturgy, for which the *Jerusalem Lectionary* was translated during the fifth century and put into use. It has been remarked by historians who studied the topic of liturgical tradition how surprising it was that the Jerusalem liturgy, processional and unique in its kind, organically linked from the beginning to the holy places of Armenia.²⁶⁸ Before focusing on the part of Etchmiadzin, a similar process might be traced in the neighboring territory of Georgia. If the liturgy was accepted and adopted by the Armenians without significant changes, we could assume it was the same for Georgians.²⁶⁹ This thought is supported by Garibian de Vartavan, who studied the topic most profoundly. According to the newest findings and theories, a similar case of imitation of the Holy Site also happened in the Georgian Cathedral of Mtskheta from the fourth century.²⁷⁰ Even when the plan of Jerusalem has been slightly modified according to the site. The view of the three Georgian shrines from the site of Jvari is said to compose and mimic that of the three shrines of Jerusalem from the Cross of Golgotha. The place is also connected with the spread of Christianity in the country and the enlightener of Georgians, Saint Nino. According to Garibian, if we remember that during the fifth century, the *Jerusalem Lectionary* was also translated and introduced in Georgia in its

²⁶⁶ Krautheimer 1942, p. 3; Foletti, I., “Germigny-des-Prés, il Santo Sepolcro e la Gerusalemme celeste”, in: *Convivium*, 1/1, (2014), pp. 32-39.

²⁶⁷ Such an idea has already been explored by Gabikyan 1963, Garibian de Vartavan 2009, Kazaryan 2016.

²⁶⁸ Hunt 1984, p. 126.

²⁶⁹ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 275.

²⁷⁰ For the latest bibliography on Mtskheta, see, for example, Hoffman, Wolf, 2018; Bacci 2016, pp. 206-225; Mgalobishvili 2014, pp. 59-66; Khoshtaria 2014, pp. 81-90; Donabédian 2012, pp. 215-269.

stationary form, there will no longer be a doubt that the topographical arrangement of Georgian monuments was intentional.²⁷¹ Very likely, the same goes for constructing the three martyria in Etchmiadzin.

To better support the thought that the churches of Etchmiadzin were deliberately based and built on the concept of Jerusalem, we must repeat the things we already know from the previous chapters. Saint Gregory the Illuminator founded the Mother Church within the walls of Etchmiadzin.²⁷² Catholicos Nerses the Great probably rebuilt it after the war with the Persians in 360.²⁷³ Another reconstruction followed at the end of the fourth century, undertaken by Catholicos Sahak the Great, who established the patriarchal seat in the city.²⁷⁴ As the sources place this event after the invention of the alphabet and the translation of *the Scriptures* and during the reign of the Armenian king Vramshapur (399/401-414/417), it can be assumed that the work began shortly before the death of the latter, that is to say around 410-13.²⁷⁵ Vahan Mamikonean completely rebuilt it almost a century later.²⁷⁶

The point of this short summary is that considering the war, the devastated state of the churches, and the whole area combined with the overall bad socio-political situation of the country, it is evident that something needed to be done to stabilize it back together. To rebuild the Cathedral and construct the adjacent churches and therefore create a new complex in the city that would resemble the most important holy place is only a logical assumption. With the introduction of *the Lectionary* and reorganization of the Armenian liturgy, the churches were slowly constructed, and the city was transformed to resemble the topographical image of Jerusalem of the fourth century. Thus, the three martyria would have been arranged in relation to the Mother Church in a particular way to reproduce, in the number and the identical arrangement, the four most important holy

²⁷¹ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 282.

²⁷² See note 30.

²⁷³ See note 133.

²⁷⁴ See Chapter 3.

²⁷⁵ Garibian de Vartavan 2003-2004, p 405.

²⁷⁶ See note 142.

places of Jerusalem at the time, to which also the Jerusalem-Solymitan liturgy most often refers.²⁷⁷

There is no written evidence indicating that the architects of Armenia aimed to recreate the image of New Jerusalem. The research is based only on the architectural comparison of the monuments and literary sources.

The tradition to recreate the complex of Jerusalem started with Catholicos Komitas (615-628). In the Saint Hripsime church, the image is supposedly presented in the shape of cupola heads. In the Cathedral, which can be compared with the Cubiculum of the Holy Sepulchre, Komitas erected a new cupola on the twelve-sided drum base.²⁷⁸ The base was decorated with an arched order with twisted columns and relief portraits of twelve apostles in medallions. It was crowned with a broken cornice under the umbrella-shaped roof. The cupola head is the oldest of all the reproductions of the Jerusalem sanctuary. The other Armenian monuments continued to develop the theme of Heavenly Jerusalem further.²⁷⁹

To sum up, a visible resemblance can be seen, especially when comparing city plans. In the place of the Cathedral is the Church of the Resurrection. The church of Saint Hripsime is in the same place as the church of Eleona. The Church of Hogevariki corresponds to the position of the current building of the Shoghakat church, and the Mother Church of Zion is the church of Saint Gayane.²⁸⁰

5.2 The Heavenly Jerusalem

With the city's development and the subsequent spread of pilgrimage at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century, Jerusalem raised the interest of the

²⁷⁷ According to Renoux, the Jerusalem-based Lectionary was introduced into Armenia between 417 and 435, a period which perfectly collaborates with a date when the dedication of the Etchmiadzin sanctuaries can be fixed - between 414 and 417. For the citation, see Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 275.

²⁷⁸ The reconstruction of the drum was done by Kazaryan. See Kazaryan, Mikayelyan 2020, pp. 79.

²⁷⁹ Kazaryan 2016, p. 16. For other examples, see the whole study.

²⁸⁰ The plans are also compared in Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 74.

Christian world.²⁸¹ The legend of the vision of the cross that appeared in the sky of Jerusalem only further promoted its popularity. It represented the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ, therefore, characterized the most important ideas of Christian ecclesiasticism. The Heavenly Temple and the Heavenly Jerusalem were executed on earth as the Resurrection Temple was built in Golgotha and the Holy City. The territory of this New Jerusalem stretched between three sacred heights: Golgotha, Zion, and the Mount of Olives. The religious plan was executed in the form of the four oldest churches in the city – the New Temple, the Eleona on the Mount of Olives, the Church of the Exorcist, and Zion.²⁸²

The legendary vision of Saint Gregory by Agathangelos supposedly originated around the same time as the legend of Cross, or right after, in the fourth-fifth century, and the story shows several parallels. In the vision, the author described the architectural structure standing on four fiery columns on a circular gold base, connected by vaults or arches which supported a dome and appeared in the middle of the city. It may refer to a four-columned canopy or ciborium, a structure with long funerary associations. Later in the account, the structure is interpreted as the church of the Heavenly Jerusalem.²⁸³ At the same time, it described the position of the martyria. The symbolism of the Vision is built on two theologically significant events: the martyrdom of the virgins and the descent of celestial beings to earth. Just like the vision of the Cross in Jerusalem, the vision of Saint Gregory was interpreted as a sign of the end of time and legitimizing the new sacred space of the Christian city.²⁸⁴

5.3 On the Armenian pilgrimage to Jerusalem

For the first three centuries of the Christian era, the evidence of Christian connections and travels between Armenia and Jerusalem can be reconstructed only tentatively; from the fourth century, the presence of Armenians traveling to the Holy Land

²⁸¹ For the general bibliography on pilgrimage, see, for example, Lidov 2008; Ashley, Deegan 2009; Bacci, Rohde 2013; Foletti et al. 2018.

²⁸² Garibian de Vartavan 2009, pp. 73-74.

²⁸³ Maranci 2001, p. 106.

²⁸⁴ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 242-252.

is firmly attested. Indeed, just two decades after the official conversion to Christianity of the kingdom of Armenia, a document known as *Letter to the Armenians* witnesses Armenians visiting and worshipping Jerusalem in private and official capacities.²⁸⁵

The performance of pilgrimages to Jerusalem played an essential role in shaping the life of the Holy Land during the Byzantine period and Muslim conquest. It also supported the founding of churches and the discoveries of relics. Several descriptive travel guidebooks of the pilgrims survived as personal memoirs.²⁸⁶ The first documented Armenian pilgrim visiting the Holy Land dates possibly from the mid-fourth century. Armenian pilgrims reached as far south as the Sinai.²⁸⁷ Since Armenians frequently traveled to Jerusalem and undertook pilgrimages, it is very plausible that the creation of the churches in Etchmiadzin based on the image of the famous Jerusalem was also connected to the need to strengthen the country's position economically and politically.

The studies on medieval pilgrimage have often tended to disregard the economic and financial aspects, focusing instead on social, cultural, and religious elements. Yet pilgrimage itself may be recognized as a certain form of contract. It is a relationship between the person and the journey, worship of a place or a person, and donation of offerings. The consideration for this is the possibility of miraculous intervention in this world and redemption in the next.²⁸⁸

The pilgrimages formed a new physical approach to biblical events, their spiritual ones, and their symbolic interpretations. Pilgrims' faith needed to relate to visible objects, relics, places, images, and even religious buildings.²⁸⁹

Pilgrimages to the *loca sancta* spread in Armenia in later centuries, starting from the first years of adopting Christianity. Many Armenian travelers began undertaking

²⁸⁵ Daim et al. 2020, p. 80.

²⁸⁶ It is very reasonable to suggest that the maps were drawn, too, though none are preserved today. The article by Yoram Tsafrir focused on this issue. The author attempted to reconstruct such maps and prove that they were available to medieval pilgrims who visited the Holy Land. See Tsafrir 1986, p. 129.

²⁸⁷ The argument that a council held at Dvin in 536 had forbidden Armenians to perform pilgrimages to the Holy Land rests on the late seventeenth-century, *Chronicle* of Galanus. No other earlier Armenian sources refer to this or a council held at Dvin in 536. See Garitte 1952, p. 140, Maraval 1985, p. 75. In Garsoian 2012, p. 99.

²⁸⁸ Bell, Dale 2011, p. 624.

²⁸⁹ Garibian de Vartavan 2009, p. 71.

journeys to the Christian world's famous holy places such as Jerusalem, Rome, Compostela, Constantinople, and others. Naturally, they included the essential sanctuaries in Armenia itself. The city of Etchmiadzin has attracted pilgrims for many years. Besides the martyria, the main Cathedral holds the most important relics, perhaps Saint Gregory's hand, preserved in a silver case.²⁹⁰

The written memories about the places they visited turned into literary works – travelogues. In those reports, the travelers describe the details related to the journey – the settlements on the way, the people they met, famous monasteries, churches, and the relics kept in them.²⁹¹ What is unique about these works is that they provide insight into travelers' thoughts and feelings about what they saw.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Boettiger 2016, p. 55.

²⁹¹ When we look into Armenian scholarship, different materials relevant to travel notes, in general, can be found reflected in various issues of “Etchmiadzin” magazine.

²⁹² For the travelogues of Armenian authors discussing the churches in Etchmiadzin, see Shakhhatunians, H., *Էջմիածնի եւ Հինգ Քառասուն Արարատայ* II [Description of the Etchmiadzin cathedral and the five districts of Ararat, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 1842; Hananyan, H., “Հենրի Մարտինը Էջմիածնում 1812 թվին” [Henry Martin in Etchmiadzin in 1812, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Սայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, Գ.-Դ. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 1948, pp. 58-61; Vahyan, V., “Էջմիածին—Զվարթնոց” [Etchmiadzin–Zvartnots, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Սայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, Ա.-Գ. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 1951, pp. 35-38; Polatyan, D., “Ուղեւորություն ի Սուրբ Էջմիածին” [Journey to Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Սայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, Դ. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 1954, pp. 45-54; Grigoryan, K., “Էջմիածնի մայր տաճարը ռուս գրողների եւ ճանապարհորդների օրագրերում” [Etchmiadzin Cathedral in the diaries of Russian writers and travelers], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Սայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, Դ., էջ. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 1956, pp. 58-59; Grigoryan, K., “Ս. Էջմիածինը ռուս մարդկանց ճանապարհորդական նոթերում ու Հուշերում” [S. Etchmiadzin in travel notes and memoirs of Russian people, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Սայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, Դ. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 1978, pp. 57-63; Poghosyan, G., “Գ. Պողոսյան, Եվրոպական ուղեգրողները Ս. Էջմիածնի, հայոց եկեղեցու սրբությունների եւ սրբալույս մյուռնի մասին. Ժան Շարդեն” [European correspondents about S. Etchmiadzin. Sacraments of Armenian Church and sacred Muron: Jean Chardin, in Armenian], in: *Էջմիածին. Պաշտօնական ամսագիր Ամենայն Հայոց Կաթողիկոսության Սայր Աթոռոյ Սրբոյ Էջմիածնի*, Բ. [Etchmiadzin. Official Journal of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in Armenian], Etchmiadzin 2008, pp. 104-108.

To sum up, since the Armenians frequently traveled and undertook pilgrimages to Jerusalem, it is only logical that one of the reasons for building the three churches based on the famous pilgrimage center was to repeat the same concept and lure pilgrims to the area. This act increased the economic flow to the country and created a firm spiritual center. The Cathedral and the monastery complex have been the building elements for the development of the Armenian nation's sense of identity, and the pilgrimage would only accentuate it further.

Conclusion

The last part of the thesis is focused on the relationship between the city of Etchmiadzin and Jerusalem. In the text, I tried to explore the connection of legends to the construction of the three churches devoted to the martyrs and their possible location within the city area after their construction in the seventh century. Later, I attempted to analyze further the resemblance of the legends and the churches of Etchmiadzin with the construct of Heavenly Jerusalem. Based on visual and textual similarities, I have concluded that the Armenian churches were deliberately placed in the city to mirror the position of Jerusalem's most famous temples. One of the reasons for this might have been the urge to strengthen the Armenian position in the country and bring the pilgrims to the site.

Final Conclusion

This study was dedicated to the four churches in the urban area of the current city of Etchmiadzin. To this day, the territory of Armenia is studded with monasteries, churches, and different types of fortifications. In our context, I have focused mostly on the period prior to the seventh century and on the relation, as I see it, between the churches and the urban area.

Due to the almost non-existing information about the Cathedral during the eleven centuries from its construction until its re-consecration as the seat of a patriarch in 1441,

it is problematic to define its function from that stage. We also have no architectural descriptions from that time, and the later ones are mostly from non-specialists who visited the monastery. We can note the two Greek inscriptions that have been discovered on the eastern part of the north wall next to two sculptural reliefs and dated to the fourth century by Avetysian. Their presence might attest to the active use of the church before the war with the Persians or, more possibly, after the reconstruction of Saint Sahak in the fourth century. Based on the historiographical information available, I have dated the construction of the current building to the second half of the fifth century when it was reconstructed by Vahan Mamikonian.

The churches of Saint Hripsime and Gayane were both built as martyria. This statement is based on the literary sources and remains of the bones found under the buildings during the excavations in the 50s. From the preserved dedicatory inscription in Saint Hripsime and similarities with ground plans of other seventh-century buildings, we can date it to years between 618-621. The church of Saint Gayane, one of the finest examples of Armenian architecture that combines elements of a three-aisle basilica with a central dome, was dated to the year 630. Unfortunately, no remains of the initial Shoghakat church have survived. Therefore, we were not possible to study this topic more but only rely on the conclusions of other historians. Addressing the initial phases and appearance of the building, therefore, was not an easy task. Several questions concerned with the dating and the existence of previous structures have not been resolved adequately until now and probably cannot be until new archeological excavations will be done.

In the second part of the thesis, we aimed to reconstruct the initial location of the city and answer a question about the previous fortification. Since the foundation of the churches, the city is described as a work of theophanic origin. I proposed a study of the legendary vision by Agathangelos, or the parts related to the topic, and aimed to reconstruct the look of the region from the fourth to seventh centuries.

Our conclusion was that the churches, built on previous graves of famous martyrs, were specifically designed in the city to create a center for pilgrimage and therefore strengthen the economy of the country and the position of the Church. Our original

attempt was to find early documents that would confirm that pilgrims were actively visiting the churches during the seventh century and further reconstruct their steps. Unfortunately, we were not able to do so since no such document was found or available to us. Therefore, we only relied on hypotheses. Based on the recorded pilgrimages of Armenians to Jerusalem, already in the fourth century, we formed a hypothesis that would be the reasoning for the construction of Etchmiadzin churches and their specific placement. In our opinion, Vahan Mamikonian was aware of the effect and contribution of such pilgrimages on the economy and social-political status of the country and the Church. Therefore, it was only logical to copy or mimic the most famous pilgrimage site that was in Jerusalem. This was connected to the concept of building a “Heavenly Jerusalem” in Armenia.

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