

## **The Eternal Recurrence of Two Domes**

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In Paris, which is home to one of the largest Armenian communities outside of Armenia, the Armenian Apostolic Church is represented in an imposing building. In the 8<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, just a few meters from the Seine and a few more from the Eiffel Tower, we find the Cathedral St. Jean-Baptiste. The building on the rue Jean Goujon radiates magnificence: a portico, supported by two massive granite pillars, extends from the front. Its peaked gable is repeated on the roof of the nave. What is most striking about the architecture is a concentric tower emerging out of the structure. The octagonal tambour is long and slender, pierced by a crown of narrow arched windows. Ornamental work abounds. Eagles with spread wings keep watch from the corners of the octagon, a filigree pattern unites the window, and a floral band completes the tambour. Above it is a green dome. The roof tiles converge in a pyramid form. A large golden cross sits on the 31-meter high peak.

This is a peculiar building, and it must have impressed Claudio Gobbi as well; the artist has decided to include a historic image of this Parisian cathedral for his catalog of photography. The composed figure of the building, the clear geometry, and the central dome are reminiscent of the late Romanesque. But the ornamentation is a mixture of decorative Baroque, ancient Roman, and Seljukian forms. The cathedral is in fact a *mélange* of historical styles. French architect Albert Désiré Guilbert, who also designed a neo-Baroque building for a Catholic parish on the rue Jean Goujon, combined familiar Romanesque, Baroque and Classicism elements with architecture that was unfamiliar to him. Without ever seeing it in its original state, Guilbert is said to have designed his church in 1902 based on a model of the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin in Armenia. The construction was commissioned by Paris' archbishop, Vramchabouh Kibarian d'Artchougents, and the apostolic patriarch in Armenia. The architecture of the cathedral was supported and promoted by a patron, the Armenian-born oil magnate Alexandre Mantachian. The first mass on rue Jean Goujon was held in 1904.

Guilbert's construction for the apostolic community of Armenians in Paris is not the only one that used the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin as a model. If you flick through Claudio Gobbi's catalog, you are transported to Bucharest, Cairo and Marseille, where you see Armenian churches whose archetype must have been based on Etchmiadzin. All of these examples are well beyond Armenian historical territories and those of the present-day republic. All over the world these buildings are a vivid reminder of the Armenian diaspora.

The constant recurrence of this original building from Etchmiadzin crystallizes the iconic status of the cathedral. Its origins date back to the era of the Christianization of the Armenians in 301 AD, when the ruler of late antiquity, Tiridates III, advocated Christianity as the state religion for the region between Cappadocia and the Caspian Sea under the spiritual guidance of Saint Grigor Lusavorich. Even before the Constantinian

shift in 313 AD, the cathedral is said to have been built as the first spiritual seat of Armenian (apostolic) Christendom. Later, in Etchmiadzin, the monk Mesrop Mashtots developed the Armenian alphabet and worked on the first translations of the Bible, which were completed in 436 AD. Etchmiadzin is a place of national importance where a specific Armenian language and religion developed, and which, as an apostolic church, still has its own interpretation of Christianity today. The cathedral is a representation of Etchmiadzin; its architectural character can be copied and reproduced. Ultimately, it is a symbol of Armenian national identity.

Etchmiadzin also became known in Europe based on the descriptions of western travelers. Over the centuries, the settlement areas of Armenians became a pawn for use by the great powers. Byzantines, Persians, Turks, and Russians laid claim to such regions, and Armenian kingdoms only emerged for short periods and they completely disappeared around the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. Wars and natural disasters left many religious locations in ruins across the Caucasian country, and Armenians were subsequently able to use other churches during this unsettled period.<sup>1</sup> The architectural landscape of Armenia was full of curiosities for westerners Europeans who visited these areas.<sup>2</sup> The precious stone merchant Jean Baptiste Tavernier also believed that Etchmiadzin was the “first peculiar place when one travels through Armenia to Persia.”<sup>3</sup> In France, the stories of his trading travels were the most widely read publications of the time.<sup>4</sup> He describes the architecture of the cathedral in Etchmiadzin, which was under Persian rule but was the seat of the Catholicos and the sovereign center of the Armenian Apostolic Church, as follows: “The church is built in a cross, as are all of the churches in Armenia; a beautiful tower rises out of the middle where the twelve Apostles are located. The church is entirely made up of quadrants, and although the building is not very spacious, a large sum of gold and silver has been spent here.”<sup>5</sup>

The condition of the structure, as Tavernier saw it, was far removed from the original early 4<sup>th</sup> century building. It had been founded by King Tiridates III as a vaulted basilica, a classic building form of the late antique period predominantly found across the Roman territory of influence. It was only in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, after the Persians destroyed the original building, that the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin was given the form that Tavernier described as “built into a cross.”<sup>6</sup> The plan of construction was like a Greek cross in that there was a square center with four arms of approximately equal length. These were in turn enclosed by an outer square. A portico was attached to the building, with a central square formed by four strong pillars. The slender tambour has been placed upon them.

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<sup>1</sup> For a history of Armenia, see also: Annie and Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Histoire de l'Arménie: des origines à nos jours*, (Paris, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Niederl-Garber, *Wie Europa Armenien "entdeckte." Das Bekanntwerden der Kunstgeschichte Armeniens im Spiegel westlicher Reisender*, (Münster/Wien 2013), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Niederl-Garber p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Varazdat Harutyunyan & Vazken Tutundjian, *Monuments d'Arménie. De la préhistoire au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle A.D.*, (Beirut: Beyrouth Association culturelle Vahan Tékévan, 1975) p. 29.

Unlike in Paris, the twelve sides of the drum have a symbolic meaning: medallions with representations of the twelve Apostles have been applied to the exterior sides of the dodecagon. A dome bulges over the drum; on the outside, it is completed with a capped conical tower. This massive construction of stone blocks is a cruciform church and it is centrally structured. Inside and out, the entire architecture, its massive body and the effect of the rooms, focuses on the elevated dome.

At the instigation of the Catholicos Komitas, a stone dome was built on the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin in 618 AD. Previously, according to the cross-shaped floor plan, it had been capped with a wooden dome.<sup>7</sup> In the same year and under the same patriarch, the construction of another church in Etchmiadzin was completed not far from the cathedral. Komitas initiated the construction of a church over the grave of the Christian martyr Hripsime, who was beheaded by Tiridates III at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The design of the church stems entirely from the dome.<sup>8</sup> It is even more evident in this construction that all of the elements push towards the center. The Saint Hripsime Church is a fully shrouded tetraconch with a sixteen-sided tambour. The perpendicular wall apses with a pointed roof face the broad, almost rounded, final drum. High strut niches found in the four corners have a static function; they slim down the structure, and at the same time give it an archaic form. As with the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, the church is presented with a portico. Its characteristic canopy capped with a pointed tower reflects the structure of the dome.

Both the Church of St. Hripsime and the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin are recognized as the oldest surviving religious buildings in Armenia. As incunabula, they may have functioned as models for today's churches, which originated in areas populated by Armenians over the centuries. "Like all of the churches of Armenia", Tavernier declared in 1655, speaking of the type of cruciform church that he had also seen during his journey to St. Stephanos Church near Nakhichivan in today's Iran and in the dramatically positioned monastery of Khor Virap. Today this monastery is the most photographed subject in the country.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Claudio Gobbi could not escape a certain fascination with the scenery of the great Ararat and also recorded an image of the monastery for this publication.

The dome with its distinctive tambour, slender like that of the Cathedral or compact like that at Saint Hripsime, is an element that was interpreted in 1918 by the Viennese art historian Josef Strzygowski as a "fundamental value"<sup>10</sup> of Armenian religious architecture. Strzygowski is an ambivalent figure in art history – he was, on the one hand a connoisseur and champion of Armenian architecture and on the other, a theorist of racist world art history (*Weltkunstgeschichte*)<sup>11</sup>. After numerous studies of the sacred

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<sup>7</sup> Harutyunyan, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> Niederl-Garber p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Josef Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa*, (Vienna: A Schroll & Co., 1918) v. 2. p. 544.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Heinz Schödl, *Josef Strzygowski. Zur Entwicklung seines Denkens*. Vienna, 2011.

architecture of Armenia he came to one conclusion: “The dome centers.”<sup>12</sup> It is said to be “the backbone of the thought process of the Armenian artist.”<sup>13</sup> The Armenians absorbed the dome into their architecture from Persian and Byzantine sources at the turn of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was the heyday of Armenian culture, a time of relative peace with Byzantium, the Arabs, and Iran. Domed churches are strewn across all Armenian settlement areas from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. This includes the third most important church of the Etchmiadzin patriarch, St. Gayane (630-643 AD), or the impressive Cathedral of Zvartnots, constructed between 630 and 660 AD with a rotunda spanning 37 meters.<sup>14</sup> Today it is in ruins.

Performance engineering and the solid tufa and lava stone construction have made this architecture resistant to the effects of time. But, when one looks at what has been preserved over time, the stasis of Armenian religious architecture in the 7<sup>th</sup> century is evident. Even within the far later Vaspurakan or the royal dynasty of Bagrationi the structural forms remained the same: the domed cruciform church and the domed rotunda.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the dimensions of religious architecture expanded in these later periods – structures are longer, higher, and have more slender proportions – the ornamentation has been refined. In Kars the cathedral (929-953 AD) is an elegant, ambitious tetraconch, with narrow archivolt and fine round arches.<sup>16</sup> In Ani, the former residence of Bagratid kings, master builders created something of a mannerism in relation to the architecture, which had developed its main features in the 7<sup>th</sup> century: the tambour of the Church of Tigran Honents (1215 AD) runs the length of the structure; the two-story rotunda of the Church of the Shepherd (10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century AD) is fitted with an ornamentally turreted wreath; the chapel of the Convent of the Virgins displays a filigree architectural sculpture.<sup>17</sup> Strzygowski found the crowning achievement of religious architecture in the extinct capital of Ani: the Cathedral of Ani, designed on a cross plan that was 30 meters long and 20 meters wide, with a compass roofed nave and cupola. The Viennese art historian sees the “pride of the nation” within this fusion of a longitudinal building with a central structure.<sup>18</sup>

Ani is a myth. Abandoned since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, today it is a city of ruins in eastern Turkey. Concentrated in the former metropolis of 100,000 are the remnants of a highly developed Armenian religious architecture from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In early travelogues visitors brought stories to Europe of the “City of 1001 Churches,” as Heinrich von Poser first described it in 1675.<sup>19</sup> While initially only merchants, the aforementioned Tavernier, for example, and diplomats visited the Caucasus, expeditions to the Armenian region by researchers and inquisitive westerners became more frequent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Strzygowski, v. 2. 556.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Frédéric Macler, *Anciennes églises d'Arménie*, (Paris: Artzakank Parisi, 1923).

<sup>15</sup> For a cataloged overview of building types of Armenian churches, see also: Paolo Cuneo, *Architettura armena dal quarto al diciannovesimo secolo*, (Milan: De Luca Editore, 1988) v. I-II.

<sup>16</sup> [www.virtualani.org](http://www.virtualani.org)

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Strzygowski, v. 2. p. 593.

<sup>19</sup> Niederl-Garber p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Niederl-Garber, p. 35.

Ani was, and remains, a fascinating place for travelers. Claudio Gobbi also visited the abandoned city, whose geographical position is today charged with symbolic and political meanings. In the 19th century, Ani finally became the starting point for a scientific analysis of Armenian architecture. With their systematic descriptions, drawings, and monument plans of Ani, researchers, such as Charles Felix Texier (1802-1871) from France, Harry F.B. Lynch (1862-1913) from Great Britain, or Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941) from Austria established a history of Armenian architecture that soon referred to the entire Armenian territory. Even before Armenians received their own republic in 1918 and during politically fateful times – Strzygowski was concentrating on his research during the Turkish genocide of Armenians in 1915/16 – a historiography of Armenian architecture had already emerged, written mainly from the perspective of western scholars. The creation of an account for the style of Ani is also one of the results of this early research, such as the realization that the two churches of Etchmiadzin must have set an example for the whole of Armenian architecture.<sup>21</sup>

The diaspora that has taken place since the fall of the last kingdom in the 14<sup>th</sup> century has spread Armenians across the globe. Maintaining a common culture over increasing distances also builds on what was once communicated about their society. Western travelers, and since the 19<sup>th</sup> century European scholars, have played a major role in this process of dissemination. Albert Désiré Guilbert, the architect of the Apostolic Cathedral in Paris, had never been to Armenia, he had never seen the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin in person, but he was familiar with plans and drawings of the structure. Perhaps he used studies from Charles Félix Texier or those of Henry F. B. Lynch to design his building on the rue Jean Goujon and, to a certain degree, eternalized the western scholar's perception of Armenia. In Manhattan you will find St. Vartan Cathedral. This Armenian Apostolic Church was inaugurated in 1968 at 630 Second Avenue. It bears a striking resemblance to St. Hripsime. Had the architect ever seen the original St. Hripsime?

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Niederl-Garber pp. 44-71, 72-87, 212-221, and Armen Khatchatrian, *L'architecture arménienne du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), pp. 4-10.