

## **Claudio Gobbi. *Atlas***

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Very often a square floor plan similar to a Greek cross, an ample *narthex* at the entrance, sometimes doubling the area of the church, a high cylindrical *tambour* at the center of the *chevet*, surmounted by a sharp conical dome containing the cupola.

These are the singular and most frequent characteristics found in Armenian churches throughout the world. The basilica layout commonly found in the Occident was first adopted in Armenia during the fourth century with the arrival of Christianity in the region, and then largely abandoned after about one hundred years.

The cylindrical, mausoleum-type structure on the lines of the Pantheon, also widespread in western architecture, and its later forms seen in monuments with indisputable historical and artistic significance, such as the Rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, San Lorenzo in Milan, and San Vitale in Ravenna, was adopted only once in Armenia in the church in Zvarnots, and later raised to the ground by a devastating earthquake, with only its basalt stone ruins remaining. In some cases (important structures in particular), the square base develops into a more rectangular format to accommodate the nave, but the slender conical tower soaring above the central structure is still recognizable.

An external structure or *gavit* is often constructed against the church, most often in the form of a covered atrium where cultural activities of the monastery, such as the copying and preparation of sacred scriptures, were conducted (schola scriptorium).

These few lines describe the main features of Armenian ecclesiastical structures: these and no other since Christianity were adopted in A.D. 303 (according to legend which has now become history), following the meeting between Gregory the

Illuminator and the cruel but repentant King Tiridates III. In Armenia's current historical and political context, and wherever else persecution, desperation or commerce has taken the Armenian diaspora, churches are still constructed according to this model with very few variations; square blocks of stone, volcanic rock, tuff-stone, and grey or red basalt found in the highlands of the Caucasus Minor, or other sedimentary stone available in other parts of the world are used.

The faithfulness of the Armenian people to this ecclesiastic model is indeed singular and literally “hewn in stone”. No Renaissance, Middle Ages or Baroque has ever contaminated the purity of these architectural canons, which today are neither obsolete or antiquated, nor have the architects in this land of “screaming stones” ever digressed from these traditions, applying them with exemplary constancy.<sup>1</sup> No matter how small, wherever Armenian settlements are found, sooner or later a church will be constructed which conserves these characteristics, thus reaffirming the very identity of Armenian ecclesiastical ritual and tradition.<sup>2</sup>

It is this unfailing constancy that struck Claudio Gobbi when exploring the concept of “frontier”. Indeed, this concept goes beyond its more usual geographical or political acceptance; here it is interpreted in its more cultural dimension, giving it a completely different significance from the violent, irrational events of history. The almost obstinate and recurrent form of the Armenian Church is one of the absolute bulwarks of this frontier, which, from a certain perspective, coincides with Europe’s frontier, or with that of the Occident.

There is something paradoxical in this ideal demarcation, more convincing considering the close relation that Armenia has to both Europe and to Europeans.

Although geographically in Asia, Armenia and its cultural heritage have played a vital

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<sup>1</sup> “The land of the screaming stones” is Armenia, thus defined for the prevalently rocky scenery of its highlands, which provided the setting for the violent genocide of the Young Turks.

<sup>2</sup> In 554 AD, the Armenian Apostolic Church separated definitively from Catholicism, not recognising the dualist propositions of the Council of Chalcedony, later ratified by the Council of Constantinople. The Armenian Church chose to follow the Miaphysite doctrine as pronounced by St. Cyril of Alexandria. Today, the Armenian Apostolic Church recognises the supreme authority of the Catholicos of Etchmiadzin, and is practiced by eight to nine million people throughout the world.

role in the definition of our European identity. This is understood by tourists who are generally surprised by the elegant, classical forms of the Temple of Garni, constructed by King Tiridates the Great in the first century AD following his triumphant journey to Rome, where he paid homage to Nero, and perhaps where he kindled his architectural taste on the lines of the capital of the Roman Empire. Walking along the streets of Yerevan, the western visitor feels at home, despite the architectural monstrosities inflicted on the urban and natural environments following Soviet domination, and the undoubtedly hermetic language, further complicated by its singular alphabet.<sup>3</sup>

What is felt are not mere sensations, but *symbolic forms* such as mythology, language, religion, art and science - those elements that in the words of Ernst Cassirer, “define and regulate” an era or a civilization. My proposal, useful also in understanding Claudio Gobbi’s work, is to expand on Cassirer’s notion of “*symbolische Form*”, to encompass concrete objects, such as a church or architectural structures, and which represents the tip of the iceberg of an entire group of *operations of the spirit* or cultural elaborations that Armenia shares with the West.

Claudio Gobbi has thrown himself wholeheartedly into searching for these forms, in far-flung corners of the globe, and particularly in the Caucasus and East Anatolia. His objective is to photograph these churches using diverse but primarily analogue techniques, and to compile a collection of these images from a wide range of sources. In some cases, when personal site visits were not possible,<sup>4</sup> he made do with *ready-made* images, provided they satisfied his criteria of *visibility* and *conformity* with the other images in the series.

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<sup>3</sup> Armenian is an Indo-European language which constitutes a unit of its own in the family of Caucasian languages. The alphabet, with 39 characters was codified by the monk Mesrop Mashtots to translate the first copy of the Bible in the early decades of the fifth century AD.

<sup>4</sup> The outlying territories of historical Armenia also include some of the most “incendiary” areas of the globe: it is stage for the conflict between Kurds and Turks, in part invaded by ISIS in Syria, and now almost impracticable for the unresolved conflict between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The final result is a “catalog” of Armenian churches in the Warburgian sense; an atlas limited only in theory, and referring back to Cassirer’s thought in its primary and fundamental intentions. It is well-known that Warburg was fundamental for Cassirer and as Fritz Saxl recalled, “*both strived to understand nature and the symbolic history of the human mind*”.<sup>5</sup> Claudio Gobbi, “*si parva licet*”, also intends to follow a similarly ambitious and rigorous path, not merely by assembling an extemporaneous collection of more or less interesting images. Through his photographic dialogue and specific variations, he reaches a constantly powerful and symbolic representation of a specific human quality: the production of symbols translated into forms, and forms translated into symbols.

Indeed, his is a collection of images, and ultimately a Warburgian *library* in which, again according to Cassirer, “*the history of art, of religion and myths, and the history of language and civilizations were not merely placed next to each other casually, but refer to each other and to a common, ideal fulcrum*”.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to Warburg’s library, Claudio Gobbi’s atlas-library of about 400 images contains photographs (each one different, but obsessively comparable), compiled through a vast iconographic and symbolic reconnaissance on a single, compact element. Rather like a visual list, it never exhausts its own references, but explores their characteristics, their semantic nuclei, and their limits.

This project is both profoundly serious, and has been conducted with admirable rigor and originality. Indeed, there is nothing spectacular, nothing created for mere effect, a common phenomenon in contemporary photography. These images are not “documentary” in the sense that critics or history have attributed to this term. There is no sociological blindness, no insistence on degradation, conflict or horrific events, no misunderstanding in reporting, only an encyclopedic *meticulousness* in

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<sup>5</sup> Fritz Saxl, *Ernst Cassirer*, in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, Tudor Publishing Company, New York, 1958, p. 50 (translation by the author).

<sup>6</sup> E. Cassirer, *Der Begriff der symbolischen Form in Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaft*, p.11, cit. in Ferrari, *Ernst Cassirer e la biblioteca Warburg*, in “*Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana*”, 6, 1: pp. 91-130, 1986, p. 94 .

collating and classifying, and attention to detail. This unhurried methodological approach evokes an imaginary reconstruction (through images), of a geography of frontiers, a precarious and transitory *limen* which is endlessly redefined, but which conserves its integrity through imperturbable signs, which remain stable and indifferent to time. Such indeed are Armenian churches.

Photography presumes to normatively (and sometimes even legally) bear witness to the existing. Claudio Gobbi's photographs prove his research as something more than mere chronicle; they are suspended in the present yet saturated with the past. They demonstrate the immutability of signs to the second degree by sharing an archaic element with the object through the use of analogue photography, a technique also tenaciously anchored in history. Indeed, due to its immense technical complexities, this technique is almost never used and scarcely present in today's aesthetics, which demand the rigorous perfection of "straight photography".

Once again we are dealing with a frontier, a linguistic border which takes on the sense and values of those traces of Armenia disseminated through space and time, and often mere ruins, still able, however, to communicate their sense of existence. From the heart of this invisible *topos*, Claudio Gobbi lovingly and meticulously extracts these traces and collocates them in his archive of light and shadow as silent interrogations of existence in history.