

Notes on the origins and symbology of the conical dome in Armenian church architecture

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Abstract: Soon after Armenia became the first state to adopt Christianity in 301, its architects developed a new sacral architecture to accommodate the liturgical requirements of the new faith, with a liturgy that made larger indoor spaces necessary, unlike the pagan temples, which essentially functioned as repositories of the sculptures of gods. In medieval Armenian church architecture, the most characteristically outstanding feature became the conical dome. There is uncertainty about the origins of the dome, which Armenian architecture historian Toros Toramanyan traces back to Persian architecture. In the early literature, we find an indistinct use of *khoran* (canopy) and *gmbet* (dome) in early literature. While the terminological ambiguity may be confusing, the semiotics are the same: the church, a meeting place of the faithful, is a symbol of the kingdom of heaven. This is represented by the dome, the absence of which by the 6th-7th centuries had become almost inconceivable in Armenian church architecture. Toramanyan has indicated that the conical dome represents the summit of Mt. Ararat, later also mimicked by the cowl (*vegħar*) worn since at least the 11th century by the celibate priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church, yet there is no evidence to corroborate this hypothesis. As Armenian studies scholar Robert S. Thomson has noted, ancient Armenian authors did not dwell much on the symbology of art and architecture other than generalities.

Keywords: Armenian Church, conical dome, Toramanyan, church, Armenia



Figure 1. An Armenian priest wearing the distinctive cowl or veggar outside the church of Gandzasar, in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), February 2021. (Photo: Avedis Hadjian)

As Armenia became the first state to adopt Christianity in 301, architects needed to break new ground from scratch with the new religion. The devotional architecture of the Hellenistic, Roman, or Persian tradition did not offer a satisfactory template for the liturgical needs of the Christian faith and architecture had to reflect the tenets of the new faith. The structural requirements of Christian liturgy were fundamentally different from those of the pagan era, as Suren Mnatsakanyan has pointed out.¹

Whereas pagan temples essentially functioned as repositories of the sculptures of gods or other deities, while most ceremonies were performed outside with people gathering in the open, Christian rites called for different, large interior spaces for the performance of the rites.²

¹ Suren Mnatsakanyan, *Հայկական վաղ մեմորիալ հուշարձանները* [Armenian Early Medieval Memorial Monuments] (Yerevan: Art Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, 1982), 54-5.

² Mnatsakanyan, *Հայկական ճարտարապետության պատմություն, հատոր Բ*. [History of Armenian Architecture II] (Yerevan: National Academy of Sciences, 2002), 137.

These included the eucharist but also the needs of the evolving liturgy, which in the case of the Armenian church, during Tabernacle feasts and other Church holidays, included the Procession of the Cross during the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and, after the 12th century, the *Andastan* (Blessing of the four corners of the world) ceremony, which is believed to have moved indoors in the Armenian church in Cilicia in the 1300s (up to that moment it was held outside, possibly as a residual leftover from the pagan era). This was not very helpful for the preservation for the pagan era temples, which were demolished to pave the way for the new architecture of God in Christian Armenia.

“[...] Pagan temples were not conceived at all as gathering places for the community,” says Mnatsakanyan. “The statues of the deities were placed there while the fundamental ceremonies were performed outside, where the people met.” Christianity, however, required “structures with interior space to congregate the public to listen to the prayer being recited from the chapel.”

Burial vaults escaped destruction because they basically served for the same purpose—preservation of the dead. They only required a minor change in the symbology of the structure, essentially, the substitution of pagan markers for the cross, but there were no fundamental differences.

Another possible factor may also have been to completely differentiate the churches from the “hated *atrushans*.”³ We do not know what these sanctuaries for fire worshipping looked like in Armenia back in the day as St. Gregory the Illuminator and the newly Christianized country set out to vigorously destroy pagan temples, yet we can make

³ *Ibid.*, 192.

an educated guess from the surviving examples in Suraxanı, near Baku.⁴ In any case, little is known about the *atrushans* in Armenia. While they were resisted as representative of an imposed religion by a foreign oppressor—in this case Iran—Christianity may not have always been welcome by Armenians, as walls surrounding ancient Armenian churches were there to protect them from local population that may have resisted conversion to the new faith. Evidence, however, points to the walls existing as protection against raids by invaders as soon as the 5th century, including first the Persians and then, after the 7th century, the Arabs.⁵

Yet there is something to be said in support of the view that the fire temples were destroyed with collective approval in Armenia. One subtle, yet important detail, is that the version of Mazdeism Persians were still trying to impose on Armenia—it's interesting to note here that religious proselytism seems to be a constant in the various iterations of the Iranian state—was Zurvanism, an alien form of Mazdeism that Armenians did not recognize.⁶ To this, we should add that the Armenian nobility was Parthian—indeed, St. Gregory the Illuminator, the foremost Patriarch of the Armenian Church and who was Parthian himself; in classical Armenian

⁴ Rufat Sattarov, “Aspects of Religious Beliefs among the Azerbaijani Turks,” in *Man and Nature in the Altaic World. Proceedings of the 49th Permanent International Altaistic Conference, Berlin, July 30-August 4, 2006* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2012), 311. It should be noted here that attributing the *atrushans* or anything preceding 1918 to the “Azerbaijani Turks” would be inaccurate. “Azerbaijan” (the former Soviet republic) was a hurried invention by the Committee of Union and Progress, the Turkish regime that planned and executed the Armenian Genocide of 1915, in an attempt to gain a foothold in the Caucasus as they pursued a pan-Turkic program in the immediate aftermath of the First World War.

⁵ Mnatsakanyan, *History of Armenian Architecture II*, 193.

⁶ James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987), 138.

literature, he is known as Grigor Partev, Gregory the Parthian—at a time they had been violently displaced by the Sassanians in Persia. In other words, it is fair to assume that there was no lack of reasons for animosity in Armenia towards Iran.

In any case, with conversion to Christianity in 301, the new architecture developed in Armenia at the service of the new religion the architect gave an “eminent place to the vault and especially to the dome.”⁷ Yet in any case, according to Toros Toramanyan, Armenia takes the idea of the dome from neighbouring Persia, often the ruling power of Armenia too, where monumental domes were used for palaces back in the Mazdeism era. In Armenian church architecture, the most characteristically outstanding feature is the conical dome, which is the focus of this article. There is uncertainty about the origins of the first domed Christian church. It is usually believed to have begun in the East, possibly in the Eastern Christian Roman Empire, with the first domed church often thought to be the Domus Aurea in Antioch, built in the 4th century and destroyed in an earthquake in 588.⁸ There is also a claim to be made for the Syriac Cathedral of Edessa, thanks to Early domes, Edessa, Constantinople with the 6th century Byzantine hymn “Another Sogitha” or “On the great church of

⁷ Patrick Donabedian, « Les débuts de l'architecture chrétienne en Orient: Les premières églises à coupole d'Arménie » [The beginnings of the Christian architecture in the East: The first domed churches of Armenia], in *Археологія домобудівництва Європи* [*The Archeology of Buildings in Europe*] (Kyiv: The Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, 2013), 346.

⁸ Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 76-8. See also Hugh N. Kennedy, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East* (Ashgate: Variorum Collected Studies 860, 2006), 185–87.

Urha,” being generally considered the first textual reference to the dome as a representation of the heavenly vault.⁹

Let me quote here from the hymn:

*“Behold! Its ceiling is stretched out like the sky and without columns, arched and simple, And it is also decorated with golden mosaic, as the firmament with shining star. And its lofty dome—behold it resembles the highest heaven, And like a helmet it is firmly placed on its lower part. The splendor of its broad arches—they portray the four ends of the earth.”*¹⁰

The number four here, or the bases of the structure supporting the dome, has another symbolism as you will often see in the Armenian churches that the four Evangelists are depicted there.¹¹ While most references to the idea of “church/ecclesia” or *եկեղեցի* (in Armenian) in the early Christian literature refer to the congregation of the faithful, there are precise references to the physical space, the building of the church, in the ancient texts.¹²

⁹ Kathleen E. McVey, “The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of an Architectural Symbol,” in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37 (1983): 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹¹ Tagouhi Avetisyan, «Հայկական միջնադարյան եկեղեցիների թմբուկների քանդակային հարդարման խորհրդանշական և պատկերազրական ավանդույթները» [The Symbolic and Iconographic Traditions of the Sculptural Decor of the Medieval Armenian Church Drums], in *Banber Matenadarani*, no. 25 (2018): 357-58.

¹² Robert W. Thomson, “Architectural Symbolism in Classical Armenian Literature,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 30, no. 1 (April 1979): 103.

Odznetsi describes the threefold division of the church into sanctuary (*khoran*), nave (*tachar*), and narthex (*gavit*) as mystically prefigured by Noah's ark with its three decks. Thus, the building of the church is the *ժողովարան* (*zhoghovaran*, "assembly" or "gathering," in a literal sense), the House of God since the Son of God is sacrificed therein, said Catholicos Hovhannes III Odznetsi (John of Odzun).¹³ Gregory of Narek in his Mystic Soliloquy 75, said that the church is built as the dwelling place of God; it is a form of the upper vault of heaven. Let me quote Odznetsi once again: "The Lord's temple... is the supernatural vault of heaven at the ends of the world."¹⁴

Yet even though the basic idea of the symbolic parallelism between the vaults or the dome of the church and the celestial vault of heaven was familiar to Armenian historians, they rarely dwell on the symbolic meaning of the architecture.¹⁵ The same spirit is reflected in the famous mention of St. Gregory the Illuminator's vision by Agatangeghos, upon which Etchmiadzin, the Holy See of the Armenian Church and possibly the oldest Christian cathedral in the world, was built, if we follow the tradition. In the vision, the main site where the Etchmiadzin Cathedral was erected was marked with a circular base of gold on which rested a column of fire and capital of cloud, surmounted by a cross of light... the whole was surmounted by a wonderful canopied (*գմբեթաձև խորանադ*; *gmbetadzev khoranard*) construction of cloud in the form of a dome.¹⁶ We also find an indistinct use of *khoran* (canopy) and *gmbet* (dome) in early literature. Even though the terminological ambiguity may be confusing in

¹³ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fr. Barsegh Sargisian, *Ագաթանգեղոսու եւ իւր բազմադարեան գաղտնիքն* [Agatangeghos and His Ancient Secret] (St. Lazarus, Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation, 1890), 102.

terms of architectural accuracy, the semiotics are the same: the church is a meeting place of the faithful; it is a symbol of the celestial city, the kingdom of heaven. And this symbol is represented in physical terms by the domed or canopied roof supported by vaults that rest on pillars.¹⁷ The central dome—seen as the symbol of the divine perfection—became the organizing principle of composition of church architecture. After its early beginnings in the 4th and 5th centuries, by the 6th and 7th centuries the domed churches ruled Armenia’s religious topography.¹⁸

“The regular celebration of the liturgy needs a longitudinal, east-west oriented plan. The dome introduces another principle: a radial form generated around a vertical central axis. The different compounds among liturgical rules and architectural forms produce different typologies.



Apart from an extraordinary ability in drawing inspiration from the experiences about the building of central spaces by neighbouring traditions—the Roman one, through Byzantine culture, the Hellenistic and the Iranian ones—the Armenian experimentation on the dome in the designing of

¹⁷ Thomson, *Architectural Symbolism*, 106-108.

¹⁸ Hilde Romanazzi, “Domed medieval churches in Armenia: form and construction,” in *Actas del Sexto Congreso Nacional de Historia de la Construcción* [Proceeds of the Sixth National Congress of the History of Construction], eds. S. Huerta, R. Marín, R. Soler, A. Zaragoza (Madrid: Instituto Juan de Herrera, 2009), 1199.

churches probably started for liturgical reasons.

Figure 2. (Photo: Avedis Hadjian)

In the middle of the 5th century, the division between Armenian and Byzantine cults caused the definition of Armenian own sacred ceremonial for the foundation of a church and the dedication of the site on which it was built.¹⁹ In many sacred texts, some words as “gmbet”, meaning dome, or “khoran”, meaning canopy, are indifferently used meaning both the physical spaces and the symbolic dimension of heaven.”

The fascinating model pictured in *Figure 2* dates back to the 5th-7th centuries. It shows us how the Holy See of Etchmiadzin looked at the time with its distinctive conic dome, (*վերաբարձեւ գմբէթ*, *vegharadzev gmbet*) in Armenian. “*Veghar*” in Armenian is the cowl or hood worn by the celibate monks. It comes from the Latin word *velarium*, and it has its meaning in the religious symbolism of vestments, and it has, as we now see, its correspondence in Armenian architectural symbolism.²⁰

In any case, even though there can be no certainty, the cowl of the Armenian monks must have followed the church dome much later. The earliest record of the priestly *veghar* in Armenian sources or historiographical literature dates back to the 11th century. These were very dark times for Armenia. On the one hand there is some testimony about millennial awe or terror –it was the first millennium of the Christian era and there were fears about the Second Coming. It is the century when the Kingdom of Vaspurakan cedes its territory to the Eastern Roman Empire, better known to us as the Byzantine Empire, and retreats to Cesarea and Sebastea, the series of events that led up to the creation of the Kingdom of Cilicia. It

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Helen C. Evans, ed., *Armenia: Art, Religion, and Trade in the Middle Ages* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 50.

is also the century of Alp Arslan's victory over the combined Byzantine-Armenian army at Manazgerd in 1070, when the Turks finally make an inroad into the Armenian heartland. Such is the centrality, both literal and figurative, of the conical dome in the Armenian conception of sacral architecture that ever after its conception in the early centuries of Christianity, Armenians beholden to this shape of heaven on earth have been reproducing it throughout the world, including in Bucharest, where the splendid cathedral consecrated in 1915—a few months after the onset of the Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire—evokes the outlines of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin and the Cathedral of Ani, the hometown of the early Armenians who settled in Romania in the Middle Ages.

The “most impressive—and surely the most renowned instance—of resolute reclamation of the ethnic identity within the religious architecture is the cathedral of the Armenian Apostolic Archbishopric in Bucharest, dedicated to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, built between 1911 and 1915 after the plans signed by Dimitrie Maimarolu,” says Vlad Bedros. “The cathedral, quite faithful to the volumetric model of the Holy Etchmiadzin, displays a profusion of traditional decorative elements which mark the main horizontal accents, generously expanding on the frontons of the transept's two arms.”²¹

In Bedros's description, one may discern yet again the Greater Ararat-Lesser Ararat pattern in the profile of the church. “A conspicuous majestic but nonetheless slender feature is the belfry resting on top of the porch which opens on four large arches sustained by massive piers,” he writes. “The belfry, with its graceful columns, seems a kiosk suspended above these compact volumes, as a delicate,

²¹ Vlad Bedros, *Armenian Artistic Heritage in Romania: Between Exilic Nostalgia and Cultural Integration* (Bucharest: Media Print, 2011), 141.

elegant counterpart for the imposing dodecagonal central dome.”²²

The Bucharest Cathedral style set it apart from the rest of Armenian church architecture in the rest of Romania. It is the only Armenian Apostolic place of worship in the country, with a specific Armenian architectural style, designed after the model of the Holy Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, and with strong architectural accents taken from the Cathedral of Ani, the former medieval capital of Armenia.²³

Architect Maimarolu had been sent by the Parish Council of the Armenian Church of Bucharest to Armenia in 1910, where he stayed for three months studying the local church architecture, particularly in Etchmiadzin.

In general, the Armenian churches in Romania do not present an Armenian architectural style, as they have been designed following the architectural patterns of the Romanian Orthodox or Russian Orthodox churches, has explained Andreea Tănase. “The reason is that, in past centuries, the Armenian Church was considered schismatic and the Armenian-Gregorian religion heretical,” she writes. “This caused the Armenians to build their churches after the model of the surrounding religious edifices, calling on local master builders and thus keeping the external appearance similar to the other churches so that they could not be distinguished.” She goes on to add that sometimes they were built in valleys (Cetatea Albă, Ismail) or with low towers (Hotin) to make them inconspicuous. A further, and possibly more powerful

²² Ibid.

²³ Andreea Tănase, ed., *Biserica Armenească din București: 100 de ani de la târnosirea Catedralei Arhiepiscopale Armene din București, 1915-2015 [The Armenian Church of Bucharest: Centennial of the Consecration of the Armenian Archbishop's Cathedral in Bucharest, 1915-2015]* (Bucharest: Editura Zamca, 2016), 41-2.

reason for that, was that “the towers of the Armenian churches had to be lower than the minarets of the Turkish mosques not to arouse the jealousy of the Turks.” There were even *fermans* (decrees) issued by the sultans which “forbade the construction of Christian church towers taller than the Muslim minarets.”



Figure 3. The monastery of Khor Virap, with Mt. Ararat in the background, February 2021. (Photo: Avedis Hadjian).

The pointed, conical domes are believed to symbolize the volcanic cones of the mountains Ararat yet there is no proof to demonstrate it other than the stylistic correspondence among the cowls worn by the Armenian celibate priests, the conical domes of the Armenian churches and Mt. Ararat.

Usually two cones appear, the larger one is positioned above the nave, and the smaller one is placed at the entrance to the church. They can symbolize the Greater Ararat and the Lesser Ararat. Viewed laterally, many of the Armenian churches resemble the mountain range Ararat. Toramanyan says that the symbolic association of the dome with Mt. Ararat is based on popular belief. We can infer by this affirmation that the notion that the shape of the dome was deliberately conceived as based on Mt. Ararat cannot be demonstrated. At

the same time, right after saying that it is a popular tradition, Toramanyan adds that in pre-Christian, pagan Armenia, the Ararat was a mysterious, holy mountain, in the same way that Mt. Olympus was the revered abode of the gods for the ancient Greeks.²⁴

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²⁴ Toros Toramanyan, *Նյութեր հայկական ճարտարապետության պատմության* [Materials for the History of Armenian Architecture: Second Collection of Articles] (Yerevan: National Academy of Sciences, 1948), 31-2.

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