

Preliminary Study of the Architecture and the Plastic Arts of the Zak'are Church in the Inner Castle (Aghjkaberd) of Ani*

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Abstract—The church in the Inner Castle of the Armenian capital Ani, which until now has not been studied properly, is one of the key monuments of the Armenian architectural tradition revival that began at the turn of the 12th-13th centuries. The purpose of this article is to reveal the features of its plan and plastic decor, as well as the preliminary determination of the place of this building in the development of architecture and ornamental art of medieval Armenia. The article determines the origins of the architectural type of cruciform churches with rooms in the four corners, which formed the basis of the composition of the church and the circle of buildings of the 12th-13th centuries, in which the variability of embodiments of this type is apparent. In the analysis of the facades plastic, particular attention is paid to the blind-arcade on paired columns on the Western and Southern facades of the church as well as the design of the windows. It is noticed that the master builder of Aghjkaberd Church models the shapes of patterns with a certain degree of liveliness. He creates some plant motifs free from flat surfaces and models carvings in some places in a manner of the sculpture. In subsequent studies of this monument, the authors will clarify some forms of the composition, perform a more detailed reconstruction of the facade decor and identify the genesis of the unusual style of ornamental carving.

Keywords—*Architecture of Armenia; sculpture; blind arcade; Aghjkaberd; Ani; the art of the late 12th-early 13th century*

I. INTRODUCTION

The church, whose ruins are located in the Eastern part of the 13th century inner castle of Ani mentioned in the sources as Aghjkaberd / Kiz Kale (Maiden Castle), according to

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extensive inscriptions on the Eastern end of the South wall, has been built during the reign of the Georgian Queen Tamara appointed to rule Armenia by an amirspasalar and shahanshah Zak'are [1] [2]. The dating of the monument fits into the time between 1198/1199 — the beginning of the reign of Zak'are — and 1207 — the end of the reign of Tamara. The possibility of the construction of the church to commemorate Zak'are's new position allows for the assignment of this event to the lower boundary.

Therefore, it is one of the first churches of the new era of the flourishing of Armenian architecture after the Seljuk occupation of the country (since 1064), and challenging the rights for its territory by Muslim emirs and the Georgian kings during the 12th century. The inaccessibility of the monument, so interesting for the history of Armenian art, is the reason for its weak study. The article aims to fill this gap.

The history of the Inner Castle (Nerk'in Berd), which is mentioned in the chronicles of the 13th century, as well as in the evangel of 1298, dates back to very ancient times. It is known that earlier there has been a pagan sanctuary, and that Gregory the Illuminator baptized the prince of the castle in the early 4th century there. These references, as well as the inscriptions of the 13th-14th centuries on the church walls, testify to the revival of cultural life in this area in the era of the Zak'aryan princes or the epoch of Queen Tamara [3].

The church occupied the North-Eastern part of a small area of a rocky cliff, once fortified with a castle wall. The church has been in ruins already at the end of the 19th century. Its condition worsens after the earthquake of 1988, when the Eastern part of the Southern wall collapsed, on which a construction inscription has been located. The Eastern and Northern walls of the main volume of the church and the Northern side of its Western wall, the apse with conch, and additional corner rooms of the Northern side and a fragment of the South-Eastern pastophorion have survived until now only by a miracle ("Fig. 1").



Fig. 1. Aghjkaberd, view from the Nord. Photograph by A. Kazaryan, 2012.

The church has been known to travelers, artists, and scientists who visited Ani even before the systematic study of the heritage of the settlement in the early 20th century by architect T'oros T'oramanian and the Russian Archaeological expedition under the leadership of Nikolai Marr.

Aghjkaberd rock along with this church can be seen on the lithograph published by M.-F. Brosset. [4] The plan of the church has been measured by T'oramanian in 1906 and published in various graphic representations by P. Cuneo (1988) and S. Karapetyan (2001) [5], [6] ("Fig. 2").

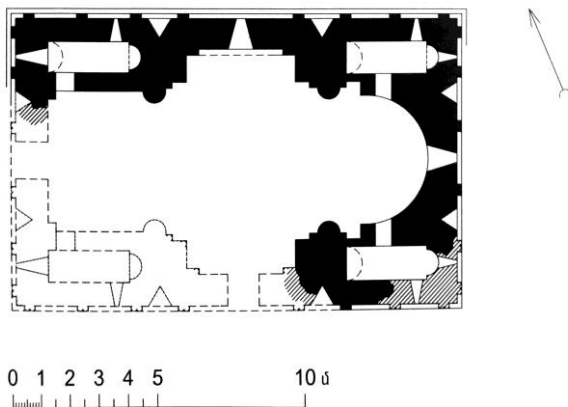


Fig. 2. Aghjkaberd, ground plan of the church by T. Toramanian (S. Karapetyan, 2011, "Fig. 387").

Many books and albums dedicated to Ani contain references to this monument, sometimes with lengthy remarks on the history of Aghjkaberd and opinions about the consecration of the church [7] [8] [9]. However, all of them lack the analysis of the architecture of the building. Brief description in the book of N.M. Tokarskiy and in the article by M. M. Hasratian does not take the Zak'are church away from the list of the little-known monuments of Armenian architecture [10] [11]. The decoration of the facades and ornamental carvings on the church are not reviewed at all.

II. ARCHITECTURAL TYPE, AND FEATURES OF THE COMPOSITION OF THE TEMPLE

Aghjkaberd church falls into the category of churches, which have a rectangular outline and a cruciform interior space, crossed-dome termination of the nave and additional spaces in the corners ("Fig. 3").



Fig. 3. Aghjkaberd Church, view from the South-East. Photograph by A. Kazaryan, 2012.

This type dates back to quite early late-Roman prototypes and had a development in early and middle Byzantine architecture. We know, in particular, the church of Hosios David in Thessaloniki (circa 500) and such churches of the middle Byzantine period, as Atik Mustafa Pasha Camii in Constantinople converted into a mosque and St. Nikolaos church in Aulis, Boeotia (11th century) [12], [13]. This type of mainly monastic churches received a special development impulse in Armenia of the Bagratuni era: in the K'arkop church (910), the churches of Surb Hakob (9th century), St. Astvatsatsin (928-944) and Amenap'rkich (966) in Sanahin, the churches of the Amberd castle (1029) and the monastery of Tsakhats K'ar (1041), the Southern church in Marmashen monastery (11th century) etc. Later, in the 13th century, churches of this type are becoming increasingly popular along with the most common buildings of the domed hall type. It was at the dawn of this new era, at the turn of the 12th-13th centuries when in Aghjkaberd of Ani and in the monastery of Harichavank' located near the capital, brothers Zak'are and Ivane have built two churches of this type, in their most developed version — with eight additional rooms in pairs in two tiers placed in the corners of the buildings. It is obvious that the first buildings, built under the auspices of the Zak'aryans, continued the development of their own tradition of Armenian architecture.

More than three dozen churches of the same type, which are presented in a summary table of the encyclopedic work by P. Cuneo [14], demonstrate the diversity of variations in the proportions and details of the plans, as well as the use of this type for the churches of the most different sizes — from large cathedrals to utterly tiny chapels. Aghjkaberd occupies the middle position in overall outline dimensions with the side lengths of 9.7 by 15.4 meters [15], being at the same time the most extended on the West-East axis. This feature is more characteristic for the domed halls, and those cross-

shaped churches with a corner space, which, as Aghjkaber, have another similar to domed halls feature — the underlining of the walls of transverse branches with the powerful pylons (Amenap'rkich in of 10-11 centuries, the church of the Makaravank' monastery of 1205).

Another feature of the Aghjkaber Church is belonging to the quantitatively largest group of the buildings of its type with corner rooms having semicircular apses on the Eastern sides. Thus, the functioning of the premises as chapels is entirely obvious. Their presence in two tiers testifies, apparently, the necessity in the conduction of a significant number of daily services, as it is seen from the emergence of numerous chapels in the medieval Eastern Christian churches.

Along with Aghjkaber, large churches of Harichavank' and Makaravank' have contributed to the reproduction of this church type already in the pre-Mongol period, in such significant for the Armenian Church monasteries, as the Geghardavank' (1215), Hovannavank' (1216-1221) and Gandzasar (1216-1238).

III. SCULPTURAL DECORATION

The small church of the inner castle of Ani is extremely interesting from the point of view of studying its decorative elements: plastic of architectural details and carvings in the interior, sculptural decoration of the main volume outside (with the design of the long-lost dome being unknown), aniconic ornamental painting of some parts on the facades. In this article we will focus exclusively on the plastic and carving of the outer walls, realizing the further need for a comprehensive analysis of the decor.

This church is being traditionally included in a separate group of Ani monuments of Zak'aryan era. These are the churches with blind-arcade decor or the churches of a "picturesque style": the church of Tigran Honents, the Bakhtaghek's church and the church of the Virgin Monastery (Kusanats). Each of them has walls of the main volume decorated with blind-arcades on twin half-columns, arches of which are covered with carvings continuing on spandrels, where animals, birds, and embossed crosses can also be found. This church, unlike the other monuments of this circle, was not surrounded by an arcade but had it only on the Western and Southern walls, where entrances visible to the visitors of the castle were located. The shape of the blind-arcade is traditional for Armenian architecture, familiar from the monuments of the 7th century, such as Zvart'nots church and T'alin cathedral, as well as a number of Ani churches of the Bagratid era [16]. As almost in every monument, the proportions and details of the blind-arcade of Aghjkaber have their own peculiarities. The width of the columns, their proportions, and distances between them are reminiscent of some churches of Ani and the neighboring monasteries built in the first half of the 11th century: the church is Arak'elots (Apostle) Cathedral and the monasteries Khtskonk' and Marmashen. Forms of bases and capitals are composed of spherical tors for every half-column and a single shared high parallelepiped volume for each pair of these hemispheres, serving as a basis for the bases and impostes for the capitals. Such details are already known from the church of the Savior

in Ani (1035) [17]. The profile of the semicircular arches consists of a high shelf and a slightly smaller width of the bevel. Similar archivolts are known from the drum of Ejmiatsin Cathedral (about 620) and the blind-arcade on the facades of Ani Cathedral (last quarter of the 10th century).

A fragment of the arcade from the Northern part of the Western wall is filled with diverse decorative elements. The arches are decorated with two ornamental ribbons running along the shelf and bevel. There are ribands that simulate tightly twisted braids running between them as on the lower edging of the arches. All this, as well as the filling decor of the spandrels, create the effect of a solid, a carpet ornament. Pattern ornaments varying for each archivolt are mostly presented in the versions of the narrow wavy double stems interlacing with other plant or geometric elements. So, in the left lower riband of the remaining arch, there is a simple undulating stem intertwined with the other one with its leaves. While in the upper riband of the same arch, in its left part, we find an ornament of closely intertwining rings and half-rings forming six-petalled "rosettes", slightly superimposed on each other, in the right part of the arch there is the ornament consisting of two symmetrically diverging wavy stems and intertwined semicircles of ribbons. In the second arch (half-arch) we find more complicated weaving. It's interesting how the architect solves the problem of ornamental alternating at the intersection of two arches: two different ornaments "untwine" the pattern of the main stems and intertwine together, tapering to an end to one curl ("Fig. 4").



Fig. 4. Aghjkaber, a fragment of the arcade from the Northern part of the Western wall. (Photograph by A. Kazaryan, 2012)

Imposts under the joints of the archivolts are decorated with carving in a variety of symmetrically diverging swirling stems with leaves and tendrils. The balls of the capitals have a ribbed-convex shape and at the bottom are surrounded by narrow rings and the two wider ribbons of harnesses and rows of semicircles.

Spandrels are filled with ornaments of round curling double stems. In the corner half-spandrel, it is harmoniously intertwined with the figure of the horse's (?) profile. A flourishing cross, which has an unusual shape for the Armenian architecture, is located in arches. All four arms of the cross expand towards the end in the form of three "petals". The Central "petal" is likened to a bud, and the two

lateral ones are thin shoots with rounded ends, deployed at an angle of almost 180 degrees.

Inside the plate of the preserved archivolt, there is a block with a wide ornamented brow of the window and three medallions above it. The Central medallion contains a cross in a recessed flat field, while the adjacent one has vegetative ornaments of complex weaving, which protrude above the main level of the plate. All three medallions seem to be cut off by the rounded border of the stone block corresponding to the bottom line of the archivolt. It may seem that the block was intended for another place, and during construction it was adjusted under the arch, cutting medallions. However, the right one contains a narrow strip, which is not covered with the ornament, echoing the edge of the "cut", which supports the assumption that originally the block was intended for this place. It is noteworthy that the upper branch of the cross was not "cut", and literally came to the border with archivolt. The Central medallion with a cross represents quite traditional for the Armenian architecture form: equal on the length of an arm extend to the ends in the form of slightly concave triangles with three-bladed completions on each of two corners. The latter circumstance distinguishes this cross from its prototypes in early Christian architecture.

The Northern wall of the Church is not so rich in carved decor but still decorated very decently. The high Central window decorated with the profiled brow and the paired semi-columns supporting it is effectively allocated on a smooth surface of the wall. Two round oculi of a pair of rings inscribed in square plates with abbreviated inscriptions in the corners and along the casing, serve as a source of lighting for the premises of the lower tier of the side compartments. The composition of the wall on top is framed by a carved cornice. Its preserved horizontal part contains an ornament that is repeated on some fallen blocks of the cornice, which lie to the South of the temple. A zigzag-shaped ribbon divides an ornamental field enclosed between two narrow shafts into a string of triangles, which are filled with alternately facing up and down lily-shaped motifs. The cornice of a higher branch on the North wall is decorated with an intricately interwoven loach.

The Eastern wall is decorated in the same strict manner. But here, as in most other Armenian churches, an altar window similarly decorated with an edge and columns is located below and flush with the ends of the triangular niches and decorated with a profiled edge of the side windows ("Fig. 5").



Fig. 5. Aghjkaber Church from the East. Photograph by A. Kazaryan, 2012.

The southern wall of the church in addition to the decorative arcade, the shape of which is unknown to us, had at least two oculi, located in accordance with those on the Northern wall, as well as the decorative rosettes (or a pair of rosettes) also inscribed in the square. Oculi are framed by twisted plaits and a vegetative ornament. Non-repeating motifs of curly stems and leaves complement the pattern in the corners of the squares., The upper rosette, the central round field of which is occupied by an eight-petal flower, is designed in a similar manner.

Among the fragments of the destroyed wall a conglomerate of blocks with two archivolts of a blind-arcade, one of which is wider than the span and much higher than the second is of particular interest ("Fig. 6"). There is no doubt that the higher element of the blind-arcade belongs to its central field. The fragment of a rectangular frame with profiling and an ornament of intertwined diamonds and rings is preserved among the debris and. Most likely, it belonged to the central window of the Southern facade, which was located above the archivolt of the blind-arcade (similar to the reconstruction of the Bakhtaghek's church by T. Toramanian) [18].



Fig. 6. Aghjkaber, collapsed fragment of the Southern façade. Photograph by A. Kazaryan, 2012.

Completing the discussion of the facade's plastic, it remains to note the autonomy of blind-arcades on each wall. The corners of the church were decorated with vertical profiling which is an elegant technique known in Ani architecture of 10th-11th centuries.

The study of the Aghjkaberd church reveals an elaborate idea of its stone decoration. It seems that the architect whom newly-made ruler of the city has commissioned the work was an outstanding master, who denied the mechanistic approach to work. First of all, it is primarily manifested in his decision to simplify the blind-arcades of the North and East facades, which can be viewed only from a distance.

Many forms and carved motifs of the church appeal to the decoration of the Ani Cathedral, built by famous architect Trdat in the reign of Smbat and Gagik Bagratuni. The similarity of the fields on the Western facade of both buildings is evident in the blind-arcades. The Church of St. Grigor (Surb Grigor) built by Tigran Honenc in Ani in 1215, also has five fields in the arcade on the Western wall. Researchers have repeatedly noted the similarity of the blind-arcade of the church with the blind-arcade of the Ani cathedral as a fact confirming the desire of the churchwarden for his commission to imitate the appearance of the main church of the city [19]. The framing of the windows with brows on columns carved oculi inscribed in a square are known both in Aghjkaberd and in the Ani cathedral. The same can be said about the medallion with an eight-petalled flower, present not only on the southern facade of Aghjkaberd, but also under the Northern gable of the Cathedral and, as it turns out, in a string of frieze on the drum [20]. The similarity of the arrangement of round medallions with a cross in fields of blind-arcades of the Western walls of both monuments is peculiar. Crosses inside medallions are also similar, but the cross from the Cathedral instead of the shamrocks on the ends of the branches has more traditional "apples". The capitals of the columns, on which the arcade of the church rests, also find their prototype on the Cathedral. So, on the South wall of the Cathedral, several capitals have the ribbed-convex shaped tors, exactly the same as on the West wall Aghjkaberd. It is the architecture of the Ani Cathedral which for the first time and so clearly shows the idea of carpet ornamentation with a series of different carved motifs, especially in the decoration of the ends of the facade niches.

The situation is completely different in the comparison of the church under consideration with its contemporary buildings within the city of Ani and within native Armenia. The ornaments and decorative items used do not find analogies among the monuments of the early Zak'aryan era. Perhaps the only example of the similarity of this time is found in the Kat'oghike Church of Nor Getik Monastery, built by Ivane Mkhargrdzeli at the end of the XII century, where in the decoration of bema the architect used ribbed capitals and the same base as in the blind-arcades of Aghjkaberd.

IV. CONCLUSION

Preliminary and the only to these days research of this monument demonstrates the possibility of disclosing the advantages of its architecture and plastic decor. The circle of Armenian churches showing variations of compositions within the architectural type of cruciform churches with rooms in four corners was designated. It is obvious that the church of the inner castle of Ani was one of the first attempts to implement this type in the Zak'aryan era, probably within the framework of the revival of the national tradition of architecture. Speaking about the stylistic peculiarities, it should be noted that the master of Aghjkaberd did not seek artistic perfection in the expression patterns of ornament, as for example in the Church of Tigran Honents or in the Haritc and Makaravank' monasteries, where the decoration seems to be a bit overly strict. Its modeling shows a certain degree of liveliness, which is especially noticeable in the vegetative ornament: the master is free from a flat surface, and the carving in some places resembles a sculpture. Attention is drawn to how the curls of leaves fall over the stem, and how the stem winds not only in its main wave but also varies in height (convexity) within a wide range. In subsequent studies, we will identify the genesis of such an unusual style and address other issues of the development of Armenian architecture at the turn of the 12th-13th centuries.

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