

# Saint Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral in Nakhichevan-on-Don: The Problem of Attribution and Formation of the Architectural Appearance of the Armenian City

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## ABSTRACT

Nakhichevan-on-Don is the city founded on the Lower Don in 1779 for Armenians resettled from Crimea. Plan of this city included construction of seven churches. At the beginning of XIX century six churches were built in an uncharacteristic for the settler's classical style. The projects of these churches have not yet been discovered, their authors are unknown, and the churches are lost. We can see these churches in the photos. Their architectural appearance shows, that professional master created them. The most interesting was cathedral of St. Gregory the Illuminator. It located on Central Square. Many researchers attributed authorship to many famous architects without any arguments. Author of this article put forward a hypothesis about authorship of this cathedral. Author did this with use of researching of written sources and comparative analysis of the cathedral and its close circle of churches. This hypothesis is important for understanding the ways and mechanisms of formation of the architectural image of Nakhichevan-on-Don.

**Keywords:** Nakhichevan-on-Don, Churches of the Don Armenians, R. Kazakov, M. Kazakov, Saint Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nakhichevan-on-Don is the city founded on the Lower Don in 1779 by Armenians who migrated from the Crimea. The urban development plan created in 1781 stipulated the construction of seven churches, six of which were built by the first decades of the XIX century. All churches were built in unusual classical forms for immigrants [1]. Today, the projects of these churches are lost, and their authors are unknown, the church buildings have not preserved to this day. Photographs taken at the end of the XIX – beginning of the XX century show that the architectural appearance of the churches indicates the involvement of a high-level master in their construction. Saint Gregory the

Illuminator Cathedral located in the central square is the most remarkable among all the city's churches. Its architecture has attracted the attention of researchers for many decades and some of them attributed the authorship to the famous architect I. E. Starov without evidence [2].

The article presents possible ways of a project creation for the construction of this church and puts forward a reasoned assumption about the possible authors of the project based on the study of written and visual sources, a comparative analysis of the architecture of the cathedral and its close churches. The search for the answer to this question is important not only from the point of view of the church attribution but has a broader meaning. The fact is that the city of Nakhichevan-on-Don was founded for the Armenians on the undeveloped area and in a few decades it was built up according to all

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the architectural and urban planning norms of Russian classicism<sup>1</sup>. This was different from the usual territory of the Crimean settlements which had a strongly pronounced medieval appearance [3].

The problem of attribution of St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral should be solved only in the context of the described historical situation that will allow to identify the ways and mechanisms of the architectural image formation of Nakhichevan-on-Don. It should be noted that the Armenians were welcome settlers for the Russian government and Catherine the Great gave them various economic benefits and administrative privileges. However, it seems that there was no need to involve well-known metropolitan architects of the imperial society to compile buildings' plans and projects in Nakhichevan-on-Don. The mechanisms of planning new cities and redeveloping old ones, compiling projects of religious, administrative, commercial and residential buildings were so well established that it did not require any special orders and decrees. At the end of the XVIII century well-known talented architects - representatives of the Moscow and St. Petersburg architectural schools worked in the South of Russia. They were invited by G. Potemkin who headed the Novorossiysk viceroyalty at that time. This viceroyalty included Nakhichevan-on-Don.

## **2. THE ARCHITECTURE OF ST. GREGORY: THE ILLUMINATOR CATHEDRAL**

The central square of the city was allocated for the construction of St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral. Originally, it was built of wood. We do not know what this first wooden cathedral was like. Materials that allow to restore its appearance have not been preserved.

The construction of the stone building of the cathedral began a few years later. The construction lasted from 1783 to 1807 [4]. The cathedral was pulled down in the 1960s and today its architectural and artistic appearance can only be restored by means of old photographs and data obtained by scanning the territory with ground penetrating radar<sup>2</sup>.

The study of these materials allows to conclude that the height of the bell tower of the cathedral with a cross was about 36 meters, the height of the church with a dome and a cross was about 28 meters. The area of the church with the bell tower was approximately 44 x 25.5 meters. The building was built on a strip foundation with a stone base and brick walls.



Figure 1 Nakhichevan-on-Don, St. Gregory's Cathedral 1783–1807 [5].

St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral was a cross-domed centrally planned building, designed in classical forms ("Figure 1"). The cathedral was rectangular in plan, slightly elongated from west to east and had a prominent apse. The three entrances to the building were decorated with four-column galleries with triangular pediments. The main volume of the building was completed by a wide entablature and the galleries rose to its level, and their pediments were continued by gable roofs that reached to the dome quadrangular frame. The dome drum was decorated with a colonnade and entablature. The sphere dome outside was topped by a blind rotunda with a cross. The southern and northern galleries were not deep than the western ones which were much more developed, square in plan and transformed into a porch closed on three sides by laced doors. It also served as the basis of a high three-tiered bell tower with a city clock built at an unknown time in the central opening of the

1. The historical period of the second half of the XVIII – first decades of the XIX century in Russian art history is usually associated with the style called classicism.

2. The work on scanning the territory of the square with the GPR "Easy Locator" of the company "MALA" was

performed at the Department of History of architecture, art and architectural restoration of the Academy of Architecture and Arts of Southern Federal University.

upper tier. The two upper tiers of the bell tower were shaped like tall cylinders with various combinations of columns and archways. The bell tower was also topped with a dome and a blind rotunda with a cross. The artistic unity of the church and the bell tower was supported by the combined semicircular archways and window openings.

The facades columns of the church can be referred to the Tuscan style [6]. There is no order superposition here. The Tuscan order is represented on the large dome drum of the church, and on the high lantern topped this dome, and on the two upper tiers, and on the lantern of the bell tower. The combination of colonnades with a common type of order decorated with monotonous cornices with large denticles makes the building elegant and gives figurative cohesiveness. The drum is especially impressive in which the wide ring of the entablature seems to be opposed to the cube-like base. Wide and high arched windows alternate with flat graphically revealed niches of the same shape in the arrangement of columns. They have something in common with the arched niches that divide the corner zones of the main volume of the church which are created in its entire height and are cut through by windows in two rows: rectangular lower and round upper niches with window frames in the form of a spoked wheel.

It is known that the dome of the bell tower of the cathedral was renovated in 1834 and 1852 due to damage caused by force of nature [7]. The design documents of these works have not been preserved, and we cannot exclude that the restored bell tower has undergone some serious changes during the renovation.

Based upon the surviving descriptions of contemporaries and the only photo of the interior of the church found in the funds of the State Research Museum of Architecture named after A. V. Shchusev, the inner space of the church was formed by four free-standing pillar supports [8] imitating colored marble, a throne and a small credence closed by a large curtain with a gild cross footstool. On both sides of the pillars there were the sacristies called by the Nakhichevans "matur" [9].

The church was painted with oil paint inside, the floor was covered with parquet. The walls and columns were decorated with icons in gilded and silvered frames. Khachkars brought from the Crimea and built into the walls of the church gave the national specifics to the decoration of the church. The exterior walls were whitewashed [10].

### **3. THE PROBLEM OF THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE ARCHITECTURAL PROJECT OF ST. GREGORY THE ILLUMINATOR CATHEDRAL**

The famous architect of the Classicism Ivan Yegorovich Starov (1744-1808) is often called the author of the project of the cathedral without evidence [11]. He worked a lot in Novorossiia, but he is called the creator of St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral not only for this reason. There are a few old photographs of the cathedral which prove the work of the metropolitan school master. Therefore, we will first identify a range of well-known metropolitan architects who could have been involved in the creation of architectural projects for Nakhichevan-on-Don to some extent.

At the end of the XVIII century non-Orthodox Christians in the Russian Empire had two most likely ways to get a project. If the church was built at the expense of the community, they paid for the design work and chose the architect. All the Armenian churches in Moscow and St. Petersburg were built in this way. Another way is the construction of religious and secular buildings from the public treasury which has become widespread in the colonies of foreign settlers. In this case, the projects were created by the provincial architects who had to compile plans for the province settlements.

It is known that the Armenian St. Catherine's Church in St. Petersburg and the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Moscow were designed by Yu. M. Felten at the request of I. Lazarev, and I. Argutinsky came to consecrate the churches of Nakhichevan immediately after the consecration of the Moscow church [12]. The practice of repeated building was a common thing and the project of Yu. M. Felten brought by Argutinsky would have been very good for the Nakhichevans. However, it is hardly possible to refer St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral to the works of Yu. M. Felten. Churches designed by the architect for representatives of different confessions bear traces of his creative manner. As it rightly noted by researchers, his churches are "elegant, but noble" [13]. He uses such decorative elements as panels, round windows, mouldings of the facade without going beyond the creative method of classicism. Even those churches that are more modest and repressed such as St. Peter and Paul's Church are still devoid of deliberate

monumentality. The features that would refer us to Yu. M. Felten as far as can be judged from the photos are absent on the facades of the cathedral of Nakhichevan-on-Don.

Most likely, the church was designed at the government expense and the letter of Catherine the Great on benefits for the Nakhichevan Armenians indirectly confirms that. It is quite likely that it was designed by the Azov province or the Novorossiysk viceroyalty architects. At that time, this territory was headed by G. A. Potemkin. He employed many famous architects including I. E. Starov. However, I. E. Starov visited the capital of the viceroyalty - the city of Ekaterinoslav in August 1787 [14] when the construction of the stone cathedral of St. Gregory the Illuminator was already in process. Potemkin had to apply the Empress several times with a request to send the architect to the south "at least for a month" [15]. During the second trip to the south in 1790 I. E. Starov visited Ekaterinoslav, Nikolaev and the Crimea [16], and compiled a general city plan of Ekaterinoslav. I. E. Starov had a lot of work to do in the south [17]. In the preserved documents there is not any reference of the architect's visit to Nakhichevan or even instructions to compile projects for this Armenian city.

In our opinion, the creation of this project is associated with the names of another group of architects who represented the Moscow or Bazhenov school of architecture. Potemkin invited M. F. Kazakov, I. V. Yegotov, I. A. Selexhov to Novorossiysk in 1783 and made them provincial architects and assistants of the architect. It is known that at that time (1783 -1792) R. R. Kazakov also worked here [18]. Documents confirm that in 1783 M. F. Kazakov was among the architects of the Azov province and I. V. Egotov was the assistant of the architect. There were five other architects and assistants [19]. In the same year, M. F. Kazakov and R. R. Kazakov are among the architects of the Kherson fortress of the Ekaterinoslav viceroyalty. It is known that M. Kazakov spent several months in the south, but R. Kazakov stayed here for several years.

Unfortunately, there is almost no information about the work of these architects in the south and the works of this period are either unknown or their authorship is in question. The situation is similar with many projects of these architects made for Moscow. A.V. Klyukina notes that many buildings are attributed to R. Kazakov "based on the tradition, without documentary evidence", which is

often simply absent and "as a rule, the construction of ... parish churches is not sufficiently documented". In addition, Rodion Kazakov is often confused with Matvey Fedorovich Kazakov [20], and the buildings of one is often attributed to another.

A favorite technique of R. R. Kazakov and his mentor M. F. Kazakov is the use of semi-circular or round outlines, rotundas or semi-rotundas and a complex facades plastic. For example, in the famous buildings of R. R. Kazakov, the authorship of which is not in doubt among researchers, we see techniques that can be compared with the architecture of the Nakhichevan Cathedral. The churches of Kuzminki and the church of St. Martin the Confessor show the author's desire to emphasize the cylindrical forms with cornices and entablatures. On the other hand, the architect avoids simple rectangular outlines. The cuboid-shaped St. Barbara's Church on Varvarka Street refers to the centric pillarless churches [21] and the authorship is not proven.

It is even more difficult to make a comparative analysis of the churches built according to the designs of other architects of this school who worked in the south. For example, the only known church of I. V. Yegotov is the church of Theodore Stratilates in Moscow (1782-1806).

Among the churches designed by famous Classicist architects who worked in the south of Russia we do not find direct analogues to the Nakhichevan Cathedral. Of course, the cathedral attribution is hardly a task that can be solved today in the conditions of a limited number of sources for analysis and based on a few surviving photographs. During this period, the position of provincial architect was already inaugurated. At that time in the Potemkin's viceroyalty this position was held by N. Ya. Alekseev, A. Lebedev, von Gazen in the Azov province, Karl Poulsen in the Ekaterinoslav province. We cannot exclude the possibility that the project was created by one of these architects and finalized by the representatives of the Moscow school. It should be considered that the project could be made by an architect who has never been to the south, and perhaps even never left the capital cities. The example of this is the work of L. Rusk and other architects who created projects for the province. It is also interesting that the parishioners of the cathedral trying to save it from destruction in the 1950s wrote a letter to L. I. Brezhnev and noted that it was built according to the project of Italian architects [22]. It is unlikely that this information

can be considered reliable, and people wanted to show the importance of the church as an architectural monument, but perhaps this statement is made not without reason.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study of historical sources, the analysis of the architecture of St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral in Nakhichevan-on-Don based on the preserved photographs allow us to conclude that the most likely authors of the project were the architects of the Ekaterinoslav province (Novorossiysk viceroyalty). In the early 1780s, well-known representatives of the Moscow architectural school were among the architects in the province (Bazhenov and Kazakov's social circle).

The history of the Armenian city and its architecture do not suggest that the cathedral was built by some special order or special involvement of the capital's architects like other city buildings and the urban development plan. I. E. Starov is excluded from the possible authors of the project because in the early 1780s he was not in the south.

Nakhichevan-on-Don quickly acquired its classic appearance like other new cities in the South of Russia. This can be considered as one of the evidences of the work of a well-established administrative mechanism and the special care of the authorities for the architectural and urban beautification of the cities of the empire, as well as the existing system of control over compliance with architectural and urban planning standards.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Olga Baeva.

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