

On the Character of the Medieval Architecture on the Example the ‘Domed Halls’ of Ani and Vicinity of the 10th–11th Centuries*

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Abstract—This paper reflects a new view of the development of the medieval architecture as a result of previous author’s studies and the current examination of the typological group of Armenian churches, so called ‘Domed halls’ of the 10th–11th centuries at the Bagratids’ capital Ani and its vicinity. Among the stereotypes in the evaluation of medieval Armenian architecture there is a persistent tradition of understanding a development process as evolutionary. The consideration of the monuments leads to the negation of the sequential evolution of the studied architectural type. It is rather possible to talk about the existence of some general development trend among the diverse solutions, a significant part of which indicates the implementation of the most daring architectural ideas within the already known spatial structures. The Creative approach to the implementation of the commission, the desire of the architects to transform the proportions of the dome halls and the image of the church by introducing new and the interpretation of the already known forms have been decisive in the projects embodied by the masters of the capital or Ani architectural school. This approach has been developed not only in the creation of city cathedrals, but also extended to the monastic construction, the most important works of which have been the royal commissions.

Keywords—*medieval architecture; domed halls; Armenia; Ani; stereotypes; architectural creativity; architect Trdat*

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the stereotypes in the evaluation of medieval Armenian architecture there is a persistent tradition of understanding a development process as evolutionary. Already in early twentieth century the typological method has been set as the basis for the study of architectural heritage, especially in its fundamental part belonging to the late Antiquity and early Christian period. Such thoughts have been voiced especially explicitly in the research of Armenian architecture, since one of its founders, Austrian

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scientist Josef Strzygowski, has been the ideologist of the typological development of architectural forms. He has visited historical Armenia twice and published his "Four Books on Architecture" in two volumes. In this edition a large number of monuments of the 5th~7th centuries have been classified by architectural types for the first time. Guided by the thought of composition development from simple structures to complex ones, Strzygowski has arranged architectural types in order of their probable evolution. "The development of architecture is not an artistic process, but rather a need for some states and impulses...", this is the basis for the scientist’s art criticism [1].

Strzygowski approached the question of the origin of Armenian Christian churches in a dualistic manner. Assuming the possibility of a Syrian influence only on the compositions of basilicas, he introduced the idea of the formation of main types of Armenian centric churches on the basis of the Iranian dome square. According to the scientist these churches have served as the prototypes of Byzantium and Western Europe’s dome constructions [2].

Strzygowski’s concepts aroused great interest among Western researchers. O. Dalton, J. Baltrušaitis and G. Millet recognizing the validity of some statements, drew attention to the inconclusiveness of the evidences and the inaccuracy of some dates. But it is noteworthy that since then Armenian architecture has been considered as more important for the development of early Christian and medieval architecture [3]. Moreover, R. Krautheimer — a clear opponent of this approach to the history of medieval architecture — has built the section "Armenia and Georgia" in his monograph on Byzantine architecture on the polemic interpretation of the Austrian researcher’s concepts [4]. Despite the criticism of Strzygowski’s work, Armenian architectural historians consider it to be a "scientific feat" [5].

Studies of recent decades have cleared the architectural research of the early Christian period from thoughts about the typological evolution. The compositions did not depend on the constructive or other gradual development. "Neither the constructive evolution of centric structures, nor the need to increase the church interior space explains the appearance

of any of the types created in the 7th century. The architectural types themselves, determined by the peculiarities of Christian iconography, as well as their main figurative characteristics, were to a greater extent the fruit of the clients' conceptual creativity, while the masters, led by the architect, had to connect the proposed schemes with a certain constructive system and artistic embodiment. The process of creating new compositions has been creative in the broadest sense and has had a variety of guidelines, aspirations and results. Personalities – both clients and architects, who have been creating during different epochs, all have had their own mindsets which have defined the character of each new composition giving a birth to a new type or its modification" [6].

The purpose of this article is to substantiate a new view on the development of Armenian architecture in the medieval era, according to which the creative beginning of the architectural compositions and the images of churches development continued to be decisive. This point of view will be demonstrated on the example of the comparative analysis of the compositions of the churches of the last quarter of the 10th ~ the first third of the 11th century of the same architectural type — the so-called domed hall. Moreover, the focus will be on the buildings created by the masters of the Armenian metropolitan school of architecture [7] in Ani and around the city in the heyday of the Bagratuni Kingdom (961-1045).

II. ON THE NATURE OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE BAGRATIDS, AND IN THE HEYDAY OF THE ANI

It should be admitted that the perceptions of the second period of Armenian architecture, which fell on the Bagratid era, are full of thoughts about the typological evolution. The very history of the revival of church architecture in the post-Arab period seems to contribute to this understanding of the development of the national architectural tradition. The first churches of the second half of the 9th — the first half of the 10th century have been created on the examples of the majestic cathedrals and parish churches of the 7th century — the period of brilliant flourishing of arts and the rise of the national spirit and economy. This period coincided with the embodiment of liturgical and artistic taste innovations in the compositions of churches, notions of which can create the impression of the consistent development of the traditional architectural ideas. It has been the period of the temporary conscious follow-up of previous results, in a way forced, because of the need to start from the models infused with the glory of the Holy Places, but also demonstrative, declaring loyalty to a chronologically distant and almost forgotten tradition. This phenomenon is quite natural, having analogues in the world history of architecture. However, what starts in the 10th century, especially in its last decades, goes beyond the simple adaptation of known compositions to new conditions.

It would not be difficult to prove the active work of the Ani school of architecture, on the examples of such compositionally and decor-wise unique objects as the triumphal arch and the fore-church of the Horomos Monastery [8], or the Shepherd's Church outside the walls

of Ani. Each of these monuments stands out from the typology of Armenian architecture and their origin can hardly be associated with the previous stages of development of architectural compositions.

With no less confidence it would be possible to demonstrate again the advantages of the Ani Cathedral, the masterpiece of the architect Trdat. The Cathedral, which for its interior qualities has been long time ahead, or rather, predicted the possible development of European architecture. No wonder it is compared with late Romanesque and Gothic examples [9].

All these examples are undoubtedly outstanding. However, not to make them seem unique for the character of the clients' and architects' creative contributions, the main research objects in article will be the churches of only one, the most widespread type — so-called dome halls.

III. THE PLAN FEATURES OF THE DOMED HALL CHURCHES OF THE LAST QUARTER OF THE 10TH ~ THE FIRST THIRD OF THE 11TH CENTURY

The cathedral in Arutch, built in the 660s by the first prince of Armenia Grigor Mamikonyan has become the first cathedral of this architectural type. The idea of the church's innovative composition was to create a solid rectangular space with a crossed-dome ceiling system, based mainly on four piers, transversely directed and fused with the longitudinal walls of the building. "A composition formed from the conversion of local cross structures under the impression of spatial structural systems of the buildings of Justinian. The decisive role is given to the frame system, so the walls are turned into thin membranes, with wide windows cutting through them" [10]. The image of the cathedral was extremely expressive, despite the apparent simplicity of the idea and laconism of the artistic language. A departure from the once-rigid iconographic scheme, the vastness of interior space, filled with light, and the sensation of the interpenetration of this space with the outside world also indicate the rejection of the strict and severe grandeur of the image of the Eastern Christian Church in favor of a freer, perhaps more palatial aesthetics of the buildings of Justinian. "Here everything contributes to the appearance of a bright, festive mood," — as Tokarsky N. M. completes the description of the interior of Aruch [11].

Arutch Cathedral has served as the basis for modifications of the plan proposed by the architects of the 7th century in the churches in Ptghni, Zovuni and Ddmashen. It has been also reproduced in the same size played at the first big dome hall after the Arab time — the Cathedral of Yerazgavors (Shirakavan) in 890-914 in the city founded by the Bagratids as their residence. That church has become the last domed hall of that size.

Despite the fact that in the next residence of the Bagratids in Kars, the Cathedral of the Apostles (930th) repeated the church in Mastara (640s) in the same scale, and in their last capital, Ani, the church of Gagkashen (1001) on a scale reproduced the composition of Zvartnots (642-662), and the Ani Cathedral size wise appealed to the largest

churches of the 7th century. The new era demanded a change in the views of the standard urban, rural or monastery church. Small churches have been built at all times, but the type of a domed hall has been usually reproduced only in important cathedrals, which have been created at the princely residences. This has been the most common version of the Palace Church. This architectural type has been adapted for monasteries and parish churches, and the first step on this path was again the royal commission - the construction of the first stone church in the monastery of Horomos, the future necropolis of Ani Bagratids in the gorge of the Akhuryan river. The length of the Church of St. Hovhannes (or Minas) is almost three times shorter than the length of the Aruch. The proportions were more compact, and the shapes were simplified. The dome continued to be supported through the arches of the four pylons adjacent to the longitudinal walls, the Eastern part retains the traditional design of the apse with pastophorions. But it is the unusual scale that entails the extension of the altar elevation to the dome pylons, and the vaulted Eastern corner zones are interpreted by passages from the altar in the pastophorions. Not the process of the gradual rapprochement of the altar to the dome square, but the circumstances of a sharp change in the scale of the architectural form led to the modification of the composition. The new function and the reduction in the size of the dome hall in Horomos has affected the nature of the lighting of its space. Instead of the traditional line of wide windows only single slit-like openings has been left there.

The theme of the dome hall has been addressed by the architect Trdat (author of Ani Cathedral, Gagkashen and restoration of the Hagia Sofia dome) in his first major work – the Cathedral in Argina (972-992). By its size it stands between the largest cathedrals and the first church of Horomos Monastery. However, neither proportions nor forms of pylons and arches of the new Cathedral are not like any of its predecessors. The introduction of unusual quarter- and half-columns into vertically divided pylons, as well as their high and richly ornamented imposts gave a new imagery to the interior. Stylistic innovations that are characteristic of the Trdat's work, have manifested themselves with a new force and a different attitude in the creation of the Ani Cathedral, a characteristic feature of the interior of which is the presence of vertically articulated supports, the blades of which, with rare exceptions, have a rectangular section. The imposts have a clear form, they help the holistic perception of beam supports directed upward, the surfaces of which almost seamlessly turn into the forms of arches. Different styles created by the same architect in the interiors of these two cathedrals — Argina and Ani — have served as the basis for creative interpretations of the different domed halls.

So, on the one hand we notice that in a rather narrow, but long and very high hall of the Church near the village of Taylor (probably the beginning of the 11th century), to the North of Ani, the division of pylons, their completion with flat imposts, as well as the method of their laying with alternation of high rows with narrow ones, remind the character of the dome supports of Ani Cathedral. On the

other hand, in the Church of Surb Grigor Lusavorich (St. Gregory) near the village of Haykadzor [12], built by the abbot of Horomos Soghomon and the architect Samehan in 980-985, as in the so-called Unique Churches of Ani, with similar but less lofty proportions of the hall, the pylons are less extended from the longitudinal walls and their plastic echoes the forms of the pillars of the Cathedral in Argina. The elongated proportions of the plan, the structure of the altar part of these two domed halls vaguely resemble the early medieval samples. However, the pylons extend only slightly, making the transverse arches narrow arches. The shape of the pylons in both buildings is individual and unusual, but in both cases includes a wide rounded semi-column, with materially significant bases and capitals.

The same desire to form pylons with semi-columns and quarter-columns, with intermediate angular elements, has been expressed in the monastic churches of Kecharis, Marmashen and Bjni. These are the temples of a larger scale, which affected the nature of the applied dome supports. In all three structures, we can see echoes of the interior of Argina, but everywhere this echo sounds differently. Marmashen, created in late 1020s, is considered a copy of the Ani Cathedral, which is partly explained by the presence of the blind arcade on both cathedrals. But even this arcade motive was interpreted in a new artistical understanding, which is close to the work of the rotunda in Khtskonk Monastery (1024) [13].

The space of the early 11th-century church of Surb Gevorg in Horomos is rather peculiar. It has compact proportions and its interior is directed upward due to concentration in structurally important places of beams of the narrow vertical draughts which are effectively continued by the system of perspective arches. A graceful movement to the vaults and the dome is transferred by new means in this church. The external appearance of the Church in Oromos, with its steeply pitched roofs, slim facade niches and refined decor corresponds to the dynamism of the forms and solemnity of the interior image.

The third and last domed hall in Horomos dedicated to St. John the Baptist (1038), is compositionally similar to the previous two of the same monastery, but, with the size of 11.65 x 17,90 m., is the largest of them. Similar proportions and the traced dependence of its length from the dimensions of the first Church of Horomos (930~940s), indicate a purposeful following of the costumer shahinshah Hovhannes-Smbat the building traditions of the previous kings of the Ani Bagratid dynasty. By the time of its creation, the type of the domed hall has become the main one in the monastery architecture of Armenia. And since monastic architecture has already been the leading area of medieval architecture development, the type of the domed hall has been the most common theme.

By the second third of the 11th century the dome hall has evolved with the acquisition of such new features as the maximum convergence of the eastern pair of pylons with the ends of the apse up to their mergence in a single form. These attempts to transform the traditional version of the dome hall have led to the creation of a new subtype with

two only western dome pylons, and this variant has become stable in the next era of the heyday of architecture, in the 12th~14th centuries. Along with the churches of St. Grigor in the monastery of Kecharis (1003) and Astvatsatsin in Bjni (1031), the Church in Horomos (1038) is one of the first in this series of the new typology. But, unlike the other two monuments the bema is being distinguished, with the door leading to pastophorions located in its space. This scheme is inherited from the same type of churches of Horomos with the difference that not arched passages in the corner zone, anticipating the pastophoria are used there, but the doorways, leading to the pastophoria' space.

Other variations of the proportions of the naos and interpretation of the pylon shapes can be found in the two churches to the North of Ani one monastery, the main Church of the monastery of Karmir Vank (Red Monastery) in the gorge of the Akhuryan river [14] and a second single, called in Turkish Uzun-Kilis, that means a "Long Church". Both are small. The first, almost square in plan, reflects the possibilities of the most compact variation of the type of the dome hall, in which the eastern pair of pillars seemingly disappears or fuses with the shoulders of the apse. The second church fully corresponds to its present name. Only the Western half of this Church has survived, but these remains allow us to assume the small height of the hall in comparison with its expected length.

A tendency for the convergence between the Eastern pair of pillars with an apse, or to their merger was not sustainable. Uzun-Kilise and the church in Taylar, located near the Oromos, are exceptions, or indicate the parallel phenomenon of a conservative orientation. In the Taylar Church with its small size and new proportions of elements the classical early medieval scheme is carried out and, moreover, the space between a dome square and an altar is equated to distance from this square to the western wall. As a result, the dome has got to the center of naos, but much more to the West from the centerline of the church.

IV. CONCLUSION

The consideration of the buildings of the late 10th – early 11th century leads to the negation of the sequential evolution of the studied architectural type. It is rather possible to talk about the existence of some general development trend among the diverse solutions, a significant part of which indicates the implementation of the most daring architectural ideas within the already known spatial structures. The Creative approach to the implementation of the commission, the desire of the architects to transform the proportions of the dome halls and the image of the church by introducing new and the interpretation of the already known forms have been decisive in the projects embodied by the masters of the capital or Ani architectural school. This approach has been developed not only in the creation of city cathedrals, but also extended to the monastic construction, the most important works of which have been the royal commissions.

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