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ANNOTATION

The period from the 4th to the 7th centuries was the most remarkable time in the history of Armenian architecture. It was marked by Armenia's adoption of Christianity in 301 as a state religion. These were the four centuries when original Armenian early Christian architecture was formed based on the ancient Armenian architectural traditions of the periods of the Van (Biainili, Ararat-Urartu), Eruanduni, Artashesyan (in cultural interrelations with the countries of the Hellenistic world) and Arshakuni kingdoms.

Building material played a crucial role in the development of Armenian architecture. The Armenian Highland has for millennia been famed for its rich resources of building stone: basalt, granite, marble, and, especially, many varieties of tuff, probably of all hues and colors imaginable. The majority of architectural buildings of the early Middle Ages, which have survived to this day after more than 16 centuries of exposure to natural and man-made forces, were constructed from local tuffs. The individuality of Armenian architecture, in many respects dictated by the specific natural conditions (varied terrain and climate, and high seismicity), lifestyles, and ancient folk traditions, can also be put to the unparalleled variety and remarkable aesthetical and mechanical properties of Armenia's building rocks.

The country's geographic position, situated between East and West, which predetermined Armenia's active role in world trade, also played an important part in the history of Armenian culture. Armenia's close economic and political contacts with the countries of the Ancient Orient and later with Hellenistic states led to mutual contacts in culture as well (N. Tokarsky), which beyond doubt considerably enriched the Armenian art of that period.

Armenia's close religious ties with Syria in the 4th and 5th centuries brought influence to bear on some compositional and decorative forms of Syrian architecture. However, the Syrian influence on Armenian architecture in that period is, as a rule, exaggerated. In all fairness, Armenian architects in the 4th and 5th centuries took a creative approach to making use of the best they found in the neighboring countries' architecture by adapting its forms and composition to the local conditions. A new stage in the history of Armenian architecture set in the beginning of the second half of the 6th century, which marked the establishment, in the 7th century, of an independent Armenian architectural school with its own artistic principles and types of building.

The Armenian church's independence and the fact that Armenia was the world's first country to embrace Christianity, remaining an island in a sea of pagan beliefs for the next two decades, was among the key factors in the formation of national Armenian ecclesiastical architecture. This accounts for the Armenian craftsmen seeking new architectural forms for the buildings of a new religion starting in the early 4th century. The Armenian church became autocephalous in 372. It disrupted relations with the Nestorian principles at the Ephesus Council in 431 and, finally, renounced the principles

of the Chalcedonian Assembly at the Dvin Council in 506. Those moves, confirmed at the second Dvin Council in 554, led to Armenia's rupture with the Byzantine Empire and its church.

The Armenian church's autochthonous character, of course, did not automatically or immediately lead to the same effect in church architecture. The rupture between the churches, however, had an enormous positive effect on Armenian architecture: at the end of the 6th century and through the 7th century there was a real leap in Armenian architecture, the like of which was unheard of in any other country of the Christian world of that period (A. Jacobson).

Not a single monumental building duplicating the classical compositions of Byzantine architecture was erected in Armenia in that period. The handling of exterior façades also differed radically: little importance was attached to them in the Constantinople school of Byzantine architecture, which regarded the interior scheme as what mattered most, while in Armenia façades played a very important part in building architecture and had their own artistic value.

Neighboring Georgia alone had something relatively close to Armenian architecture in church building typology and decor in the early Middle Ages. This closeness may be attributed to close political and church contacts between the two countries, direct creative contacts between their architects, similar natural conditions, building techniques, and building material (stone).

The stupendous upsurge in 6th and 7th century Armenian architecture had its roots in the preceding period of its history. At the close of the 5th century, as is evidenced by Tekhor, Armenia became one of the centers where the domed cross church building was elaborated on. The vaulted Armenian basilica served as a basis for its development.

Unlike its Western counterpart (with a wooden ceiling and closely spaced slender columns), its heavy pylons spaced almost equally from one another lengthwise and across gave it enough strength to support a dome without major alterations in design. This type of the church building was widespread in Armenia in the 7th century when it was brought to perfection.

The main trend in 6th and 7th century Armenian architecture sprang from the architects' desire to integrate to the greatest possible degree the church interior. It was revealed most strikingly in central domed edifices. This trend was first recognized already in the 4th and 5th centuries (in the four-apse Shahat Church, the dome square at Voghjaberd, and the Echmiadzin Cathedral). Having made their final option for domes only, Armenian architects were single-mindedly developing a range of tetraconchas beginning in the late 6th century. The central domed system so elaborately honed in Armenia was even more widespread here than in the Byzantine Empire and Syria. Armenian architects' diverse tetraconchas are uncommon and have an unmistakable identity, like a tetraconcha on a square base (the Mastara type) or a tetraconcha on a square base with four central pillars (the Echmiadzin and Bagharan

type), too important in composition to be confined within the bounds of national architecture, and also a tetraconcha with corner niches (worked on from a prototype in Mokhrenis).

Wherever an old central domed scheme was borrowed, it was interpreted in a special way by Armenian architects who never failed to take it many steps further toward an architectural and artistic wonder. The Zvartnots Cathedral, which represents an outstanding specimen of the 7th century Armenian architecture, is a brilliant illustration of this searching approach. They started out from the tetraconcha plan scheme with an annex, the churches in Apamea, Syria, in the first place. The architect of the Zvartnots Cathedral (Nerses III the Builder) had considerably worked out that composition: first, he changed the shape of the pillars, making them lighter; next, whereas the lower part of similar Syrian churches is mostly rectangular in plan, Zvartnots has a circular tier instead, in full harmony with the general centric scheme space. Finally, the pyramidshaped bulk of the building, with its three telescoping cylindrical components, is akin to Armenian classical architecture of the early Middle Ages in appearance and decor.

In their search for new forms of the domed cross system in the 7th century, Armenian architects produced a new variety of this type, churches with side exedras imparting the characteristics of a central domed composition to the basilica building (as in the Dvin and Thalin cathedrals).

In their desire to avoid dividing up the interior by aisles of dome-bearing pillars, Armenian architects created a domed hall composition typical of Armenia alone, with the Ptghni and Aruch cathedrals as its remarkable examples.

Speaking about any national architectural school in the Middle Ages, its typological identity should be regarded as the basic criterion: even a single new type of religious building was a great creative success for a given country's architects, particularly in early Christian Armenia, whose architects produced several new original compositions of monumental structures, making a valuable contribution to the treasure-trove of world architecture.