

CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean
Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova



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Ruben Campini, Margarita Khakhanova, Annalisa Moraschi,
Adrien Palladino, Nicolas Samaretz

Abstracts editor / Johanna Zacharias

Typesetting / Berta K. Skalíková

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E-mail / convivium@earlymedievalstudies.com
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**Re-Thinking
Late Antique Armenia**
Historiography, Material
Culture, and Heritage

edited by
Adrien Palladino, Ruben Campini,
Annalisa Moraschi & Ivan Foletti

RE-THINKING LATE ANTIQUE ARMENIA
HISTORIOGRAPHY, MATERIAL CULTURE, AND HERITAGE

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Late Antiquity and Armenia

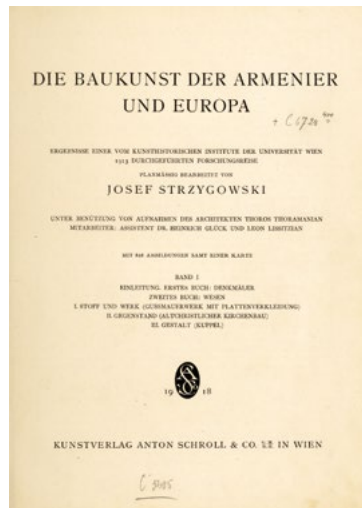
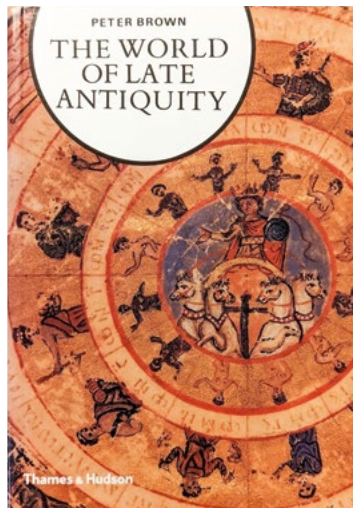
From Marginalized Region to Creative Force

Ivan Foletti & Adrien Palladino

Today, most consider Armenia the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its state religion. While the exact date of this event is still debated, Armenia was thus a “precursor” to the Roman Empire, which adopted Christianity as its state religion some eighty years later¹. Therefore, the relatively marginal place of Armenian art and architecture in studies devoted to the emergence of Christian culture in the Mediterranean presents a paradox at odds with the reality of history. This situation is even more striking when one considers the outstanding quality and value of the monuments and objects preserved in the region in the period often designated as “Late Antiquity”.

This paradox is multilayered, but begins with the issues arising from the employ of the term “Late Antiquity”. This notion was coined in the mid-nineteenth century as “Spätantike”, but its definition has expanded since the 1970s, especially under one of the

¹ Jean-Pierre Mahé, “La christianisation de l’Arménie”, in *Armenia Sacra: Mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (Ive–XVIIIe siècle)*, Jannic Durand, Ioanna Rapti, Dorota Giovannoni eds, Paris 2007, pp. 21–27.



1/ Cover of Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, London 1971

2/ Title page of Josef Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa*, Vienna 1918

most prolific historians dealing with the period: Peter Brown². His studies, despite critiques and opposition, have since then transformed our understanding of Late Antiquity³. The Brownian model exploded the chronological and geographical boundaries of a Late Antiquity which had until then essentially been conceived as Eurocentric, refocusing on continuities between the world of Marcus Aurelius (second century CE) and that of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE [Fig. 1]⁴. In the wake of Brown, scholars proposed all sorts of variations on this cultural and chronological framework, in most cases arguing for expansion, sometimes up the year 1000⁵. On the opposite spectrum, scholars such as Polymnia Athanassiadi have insisted on continuity, suggesting that the deep socio-cultural and religious mutations of the fourth to the early seventh century CE are incomprehensible without the Hellenistic background, arguing for a “Graeco-Roman millennium” ranging from Alexander the Great to early Islam⁶. Such models have been variously interpreted and employed from the perspective of visual and material culture, often in the same direction of chronological, geographical, and – importantly – disciplinary expansion⁷. No matter which model we embrace, we are facing a variety of “Late Antiquities”, more or less radical in the transformations or continuities they propose.

While the latest scholarship has still been grappling with Late Antiquity and its expanding geographical and temporal frame, the recent volume *Empires of Faith* provides an important historiographical insight into the question. In the introduction, Jaś Elsner emphasizes an essential aspect: Late Antiquity is anchored to the core of European nineteenth-century imperialism. From this perspective, studies on the late antique world are determined by the moment when the greatest expansion of European colonial empires occurred based on concepts of superiority of race and religion⁸. In this sense, the notion of Late Antiquity, however revisited in recent years, is necessarily biased since it is constructed around the supremacy of the “West”, and Christianity, whilst being rooted in colonial attitudes ranging from imperialism to Orientalism⁹.

These are essential elements in understanding the marginalization of late antique Armenian studies (amongst many others): as one major player among a plurality of cultures recently considered on the margins, Armenian art has been regarded for decades – and we will return to this below – as utterly peripheral¹⁰. In this history of marginalization, Armenian art lived briefly, from the Western perspective and largely thanks to the studies of Josef Strzygowski (1862–1941), a moment of “glory” after 1918 [Fig. 2]¹¹. In addition to genuine interest in the region’s art which lead to the first substantial Western publication

on Armenian art and sculpture, however, Strzygowski's interest was also sparked by an obsession for Aryan origins and by racial theories¹². With the collapse of the Nazi and fascist regimes and the general rejection of Strzygowski's legacy, late antique Armenian art slowly returned to the margins of interest in Western art history. At the same time, as Christina Maranci indicates, "inside and outside Armenology, it appears, Armenia is tangled up with the notorious scholar"¹³. Besides this specific moment in historiography, however, and despite the titanic efforts of scholars such as Jean-Michel Thierry, Adriano Alpagò Novello and, in the last decades, of Patrick Donabédian, Nazénie Garibian, Tim Greenwood, Zaruhi Hakobyan, Armen Kazarjan, Christina Maranci, Hamlet Petrosyan, Annegret Plontke-Lüning, and Ioanna Rapti – amongst others – Armenia, and the Transcaucasus more generally, remain in many aspects on the margins of late antique and medieval

- 2 On the historiography of Late Antiquity, see, e.g., Mario Mazza, "Tarda antichità: 'improvvisazioni e variazioni' su un tema storiografico", *Occidente/Oriente: Rivista internazionale di Studi tardoantichi*, 1 (2020), pp. 11–25; Jaś Elsner, "The Viennese Invention of Late Antiquity: Between Politics and Religion in the Forms of Late Roman Art", in *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity, Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland*, Jaś Elsner ed., Cambridge 2020, pp. 110–127. Peter Brown's most influential study remains *The World of Late Antiquity from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, London 1971.
- 3 For an overview of critiques to the late antique model proposed by Brown, see Andrea Giardina, "Esplosione di tardoantico", *Studi storici*, XL (1999), pp. 157–180; *Idem*, "Tardoantico: appunti sul dibattito attuale", *Studi storici*, XLV/1 (2004), pp. 41–46; see also Ivan Foletti, Marie Okáčová, Adrien Palladino, "A radical turn? Anxiety, rupture, and creative continuity", in *A Radical Turn? Reappropriation, Fragmentation, and Variety in the Postclassical World (3rd–8th centuries)*, Ivan Foletti, Marie Okáčová, Adrien Palladino eds = *Convivium. Supplementum* (2022), pp. 10–21. For historiographies of some of the major exponents of Late Antiquity, see *The New Late Antiquity: A Gallery of Intellectual Portraits*, Clifford Ando, Marco Formisano eds, Heidelberg 2021.
- 4 Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (n. 2); *Idem*, "The World of Late Antiquity Revisited", *Symbolae Osloenses*, LXXII/1 (1997), pp. 5–30. This chronological model was taken up in the crucial volume *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, Glen W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar eds, Cambridge, MA 1999.
- 5 See, e.g., Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: the First Millenium Refocused*, Princeton i.a. 2014. On the question, see Arnaldo Marcone, "La tarda antichità o della difficoltà delle periodizzazioni", *Studi Storici*, XLV/1 (2004), pp. 25–36.
- 6 Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Mutations of Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Farnham 2015.
- 7 An early attempt towards expansion was certainly *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique an early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (cat. exh., Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977 – February 12, 1978), Kurt Weitzmann ed., New York 1979. Recent endeavors include *A Globalized Visual Culture? Towards a Geography of Late Antique Art*, Fabio Guidetti, Katharina Meinecke eds, Oxford 2020 and *Imagining the Divine: Exploring Art in Religions of Late Antiquity across Eurasia*, Jaś Elsner, Rachel Wood eds, London 2021. See also, with focus on religious transformation, Klára Doležalová et al., "Means of Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity: Introduction", in *Means of Christian Conversion in Late Antiquity. Objects, Bodies, and Rituals*, Klára Doležalová et al. eds = *Convivium. Supplementum* (2021), pp. 10–18.
- 8 Jaś Elsner, "Introduction", in *Empires of Faith* (n. 2), pp. 1–23.
- 9 On the broad frame of nineteenth-century Orientalism, see, e.g., Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*, Washington, D.C. 2009; David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration*, New Haven i.a. 2010.
- 10 *Discovering the Art of Medieval Caucasus (1801–1945)*, Ivan Foletti, Stefano Riccioni eds = *Venezia Arti*, XXVII (2018). On the specifically perspective of Russia and USSR, see Ivan Foletti, "The Russian View of a 'Peripheral' Region. Nikodim P. Kondakov and the Southern Caucasus", *Convivium, Supplementum* (2016), pp. 2–17. Ivan Foletti, Pavel Rakitin, "From Russia with Love. The First Russian Studies on the Art of the Southern Caucasus", *Venezia Arti*, XXVII (2018), pp. 15–33; Ivan Foletti, Pavel Rakitin, "Armenian Medieval Art and Architecture in Soviet Perception: a *longue durée* Sketch", *Eurasiatica*, VII (2020), pp. 113–150.
- 11 Josef Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa*, 2 vols, Vienna 1918. For the success of Strzygowski's perspective on Armenian Art in Italy see, e.g., Stefano Riccioni, "Armenian Art and Culture from the Pages of the *Historia Imperii Mediterranei*", *Venezia Arti*, XXVII (2018), pp. 119–130.
- 12 Some of the important contributions on Strzygowski and Armenia include Christina Maranci, "Josef Strzygowski (1862–1941)", in *The New Late Antiquity* (n. 3), pp. 317–332; *Eadem*, "Locating Armenia", *Medieval Encounters*, XVII (2011), pp. 147–166; *Eadem*, *Medieval Armenian Architecture: Constructions of Race and Nation*, Leuven 2001; *Eadem*, "The historiography of Armenian architecture: Josef Strzygowski, Austria, and Armenia", *Revue des études arméniennes*, XXVIII (2001/2002), pp. 287–307; *Eadem*, "Armenian architecture as Aryan architecture: the role of Indo-European studies in the theories of Josef Strzygowski", *Visual resources*, XIII (1998), pp. 363–380. See also Talinn Grigor, "Orient oder Rom? Qajar 'Aryan' Architecture and Strzygowski's Art History", *Art Bulletin*, LXXXIX/3 (2007), pp. 562–590; on Strzygowski in general, see *Von Biala nach Wien. Josef Strzygowski und die Kunstwissenschaften*, Piotr O. Scholz, Magdalena A. Długosz eds, Vienna 2015; *Orient oder Rom? History and reception of a historiographical myth (1901–1970)*, Ivan Foletti, Francesco Lovino eds, Rome 2018.
- 13 Maranci, "Locating Armenia" (n. 12), p. 151; on Strzygowski's reception, see also Adrien Palladino, "Dissipating Strzygowski's shadow: Weitzmann on Armenian book illumination", *Convivium*, VIII/2 (2021), pp. 175–182.



3/ "Great Armenia" as described in the seventh century

art history¹⁴. In many ways, thus, art history is struggling to get rid of the patterns and prejudices of the past.

In this framework there has been, to our knowledge, no international volume devoted to the late antique arts of Armenia with a perspective that focuses on both visual and material culture and historiography. This is precisely the perspective adopted in this volume of *Convivium* – the updated proceedings of papers given at a conference held in Brno on February 20–22, 2022. This volume is claiming Armenia's centrality not only as a regional and remote outpost, but as one of the vital actors which had to negotiate with surrounding empires and religions, and further as a region which developed its own unique cultural identity. In this frame, Armenia must be studied from the perspective of regional or national issues, but even more importantly as a driving force within the broader space of the late antique Mediterranean and Eurasia. Providing new evidence strengthening this assertion, the essays in this volume focus on two sides of the same coin. Firstly, they uncover how Armenian artistic culture was frequently marginalized in previous scholarly traditions, and secondly, they present new documentation showing the importance of Armenian visual culture from the fourth century CE onwards. This introduction wishes to sketch why, in this framework, Armenia must be reconsidered as a crucial player, through two complimentary perspectives.

Armenia between empires: a long historiographical problem

The first perspective is related to its geographical position systematically presented as an in-between space defined by surrounding external entities: the Eastern Roman and Persian empires, and later the Roman and Arab worlds [Fig 3]. Thus, Armenia was always seen as peripheral to one or the other Empire, even in the absence of a singular definition of "Armenian space" during Late Antiquity¹⁵. This ambiguous status of a "nation" partitioned between Persia and Rome is already perceived in the sixth century by an unexpected figure: the famous bishop of Tours, Gregory. In his encyclopedic *History of the Franks* written around 591 CE, Gregory tells us of the "Persarmenian" envoys at the court of Emperor Justin II who sought an alliance with the Roman emperor against the Persian emperor Khosrow I:

“The Persarmenians visited Emperor Justin with a great store of unwoven silk, seeking his friendship and declaring themselves to be the enemies of the Persian emperor. Persian envoys had come to them with this message: ‘Our Emperor in his solicitude sends to ask if you intend to preserve the treaty which you have made with him’. When they had answered that they would keep intact all the promises which they had made, the envoys had replied: ‘It will be made clear that you propose to keep the terms of the treaty if you agree to worship fire as he does’. The people had answered that they would never do this. Their Bishop, who was present, added: ‘What is there divine about fire, that it should be worshipped? God created it for men to use. It is lighted from tinder. If you put water on it, it goes out. It burns as long as you add fuel, but if you neglect it, it loses its heat’. The envoys were furious when they heard the Bishop continue in this strain. They abused him roundly and hit him with their sticks. When the people had seen their Bishop covered with blood, they had attacked the envoys, seized hold of them by force and killed them. Then, as I have said, they went to seek an alliance with the Emperor”¹⁶.

Gregory’s text presents a Manichean narrative in which the Armenians are fellow Christians against the idolatrous, fire-worshipping Persians. Simultaneously it is a fascinating account of the way in which the Bishop of Tours had real knowledge of what was happening on the Eastern frontier of the world in which he lived¹⁷. Given the scarcity of preserved sixth-century sources, it provides an important account of the Christian Armenians living in the Persian territories, forced to negotiate their religious identity in the face of conversion attempts. Pressures also came from the side of the “Byzantines”: religion was mobilized as a kind of political lever and Armenia was a fulcrum between empires¹⁸. In any case, Gregory’s text is a precious testimony that Armenians existed as a distinctive identity in the sixth century, showing that they travelled and that texts and ideas likewise circulated in a much broader geographical region than may be expected based on the historiographically marginalized position of Armenia.

Crucially, Gregory’s simplistic narrative of a “nation” squeezed between two empires was repeated and exacerbated by later historiography: Armenia was frequently seen either as a space of passage – a cultural “sponge” with no proper cultural identity – or as a distant province of a greater Empire. Such an idea was confirmed by the later colonial attitudes, either from Western travelers and scholars who did not recognize Armenia’s role in the dynamics of the late antique world, or who perpetuated the view of Armenia as a small part

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- 14 See, e.g., Jean-Michel Thierry, *Les arts Arméniens*, Paris 1987; Adriano Alpago Novello, *L’architettura armena e l’Italia*, Rome 1990; *Armenia sacra* (n. 1); Annegret Plontke-Lüning, *Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien. Die Entwicklung des christlichen Sakralbaus in Lazika, Iberien, Armenien, Albanien und den Grenzregionen vom 4. bis zum 7. Jh.*, Vienna 2007; Patrick Donabédian, *L’âge d’or de l’architecture arménienne: VIIIe siècle*, Marseille 2008; Armen Kazarjan, *Cerkovnaja arhitektura stran Zakaokaz’ja VII veka: Formirovanie i razvoitie tradicii* [Church architecture of Transcaucasian countries in the seventh century: Formation and development of tradition], 4 vols, Moscow 2012; Christina Maranci, *Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia*, Turnhout 2012; *Eadem, The Art of Armenia: an Introduction*, New York 2018.
- 15 Tim Greenwood, “Armenian Space in Late Antiquity”, in *Historiography and Space in Late Antiquity*, Peter Van Nuffelen ed., Cambridge 2019, pp. 57–85.
- 16 Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* x, Bruno Krusch, Wilhelm Levison eds, MGH SRM I 1, Hannover 1951, IV, 24: “Ad Iustinum autem imperatorem Persi-Armeni cum magno syrici intexti pondere venerunt, petentes amicitias eius atque narrantis, se imperatori Persarum esse infensus. Venerant enim ad eos legati eius, dicentes: ‘Sollicitudo imperialis sciscitatur, si foedus initum cum eo custodiatis intactum’. Respondentibus illis, omnia ab his pollicita inlibata servari, dixerunt legati: ‘In hoc apparebit, vos eius amicitias custodire, si ignem, ut ille veneratur, adoraveritis’. Respondente populo, nequaquam se hoc facturum, ait episcopus, qui coram erat: ‘Quae est in igne deitas, ut venerari quaeat? Quem Deus ad usus hominum procreavit, qui fomentis accenditur, aqua restinguitur, adhibitus urit, neglectus tepescit’. Haec et his similia episcopo prosequente, legati furore succensi, actum convitiis fustibus caedunt. Cernens autem populus sacerdotem suum sanguine cruentatum, super legatus inruunt, manus iniciunt interemuntque et, sicut diximus, huius imperatoris amicitias petierunt”.
- 17 Tim Greenwood, “Armenia”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, Scott F. Johnson ed., New York 2012, pp. 115–141, sp. pp. 115–118.
- 18 Annie Mahé, Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Histoire de l’Arménie des origines à nos jours*, Paris 2012, pp. 87–115; Nina G. Garsoïan, “The Marzpanate (428–652)”, in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times, Volume I: The Dynastic Periods: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*, Richard G. Hovannesian ed., New York 1997, pp. 95–116; Nina G. Garsoïan, “The Arab Invasions and the Rise of the Bagratuni (640–884)”, in *The Armenian People* (n. 19), pp. 117–142, sp. pp. 117–125.



4/ Administrative map of the Russian Caucasus Viceroyalty, 1870

of a larger dominant Empire as, for example, in Russian Imperial and Soviet historiography [Fig. 4]. Not surprisingly, from the Russian imperial perspective, this constructed provincial and marginal past of (late antique) Armenia became a justification for the colonial policy of the Tsarist empire¹⁹. And if this perspective has been strongly challenged during the Second World War – as shown in Foletti and Rakitin’s article in this volume – it is only after the collapse of the USSR that Armenian art has started to be studied in a systematic way and without this colonial perspective in the contemporary Republic of Armenia²⁰. The vast majority of the scholarship produced in the last thirty years was published in Armenian. Because of these coexisting dynamics of marginalization and nationalization, late antique Armenian art is still presented as an ideal crossroads to study one or the other cultural reality among international audiences who have perpetuated a harmful historiography²¹. The weight of the tradition considering “Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians”, to recall the title Nina Garsoian’s book, is still overwhelming and needs to be reconfigured²². Indeed, the “borders” of Armenia in Late Antiquity were fluid and had not yet been narrowed by the ravages of history. The largest extension of historical Armenia reached ca 300,000 km² but today encompass only ca 29,000 km², what the writer Sylvain Tesson eloquently called “*un mouchoir de roche*” – “a handkerchief of rock” – shrunken by historical devastation²³.

For the field of art history, traditionally obsessed by provenance, frontiers, and cultural particularism, the apparently ambiguous status of Armenia in Late Antiquity (and later) has made the assessment of its material culture a particularly thorny question. Not only mobile objects but even monumental architecture could be attributed to one or the other dominant empires, depending on national and political agendas²⁴. Approaching Armenian Late Antiquity is thus an uneasy task which requires a critical distance to the mechanisms and problematic foundations of art history. New historiographical outlooks are engaged in this volume. They present perspectives on late antique and early medieval Armenia by

Italian, French, German, and Russian scholars active between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These papers, respectively by Beatrice Spampinato and Annalisa Moraschi, Adrien Palladino, Ruben Campini, Ivan Foletti and Pavel Rakitin highlight how dynamics of marginalization were embedded in an inevitable dialogue between politics and scholarship.

Rethinking late antique Armenian artistic culture(s)

Material culture studies opens this volume to a redefinition of Armenian cultural “identity” in the late antique world by looking beyond the pervasive impact of Rome, Persia, and later the Islamic world. From approximately the fourth to the seventh centuries CE a few of the constitutive traits of the local culture emerged: the adoption of a particular form of Christianity, the creation of an alphabet, and major geo-political transformations which provided more autonomy to the patriarchs²⁵. While such transformations are sometimes more difficult to trace in textual evidence, material culture offers data that suggests new paths to read the different layers operating across the individual regions and districts of Armenia. After the important moment of the “conversion” of Armenia which led to the creation of a proper Christian topography in the fourth and fifth century which was conceived in a close relationship to the Holy topography of Jerusalem and Syria, the properly “transitional” centuries between the sixth and the seventh centuries have been called – at least in the field of architecture – a “Golden Age”²⁶. The evidence for this burgeoning and creativity is presented in this volume by two major scholars who dealt with the question:

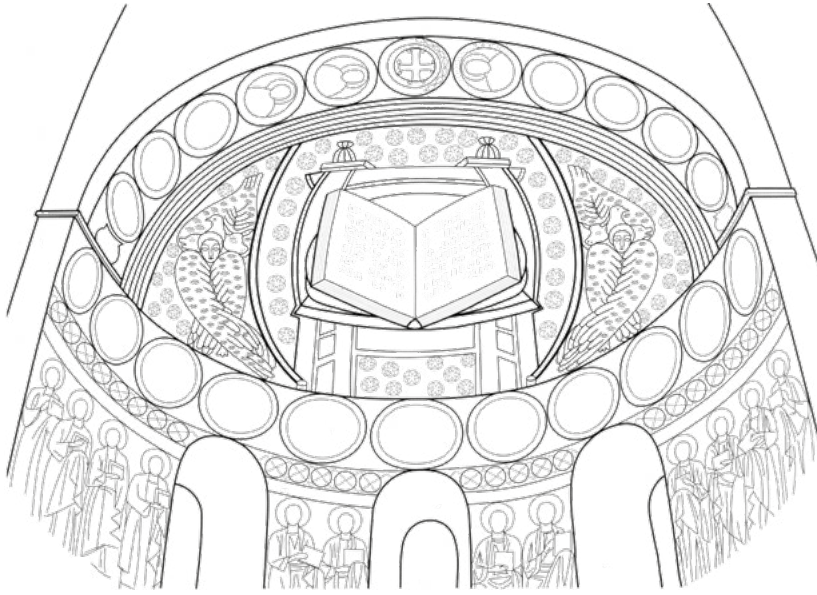
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- 19 Foletti, “The Russian View” (n. 10); Foletti/Rakitin, “From Russia with Love” (n. 10); Foletti/Rakitin, “Armenian Medieval Art” (n. 10).
- 20 See, for example: Nazénie Garibian de Vartavan, *La Jérusalem nouvelle et les premiers sanctuaires chrétiens de l’Arménie*, London 2009; Zaruhi Hakobyan, “The Chancel-Barrier Fragments and Certain Elements of the Sanctuary Design in Early Medieval Armenia”, in *Liturgical Furnishing between East and West (5th–15th century): Fragments, Objects and Context*, Fabio Coden ed., Milan 2021, pp. 100–115; Nikolaj Kotandjan, *Monumental’ naja živopis’ v rannesrednevekovoj Armenii (IV–VII veka)* [Monumental Painting in Early Medieval Armenia (4th–7th centuries)], Yerevan 2017; Seiranush Manukyan, “Freski Tateva (930 g.)”, in *Genesis Forest. Collected articles in memory of Felix Ter-Martirosov*, Yerevan 2015, pp. 296–325; Hamlet Petrosyan, “Politics, Ideology and Landscape: Early Christian Tigranakert in Artsakh”, *Electrum*, XXVIII (2021), pp. 163–187.
- 21 On Armenia as a place of cultural exchange in the later Middle Ages, see, e.g., Christiane Esche-Ramschorn, *East-West Transfer through Rome, Armenia and the Silk Road: Sharing St. Peter’s*, London / New York 2022; Helen C. Evans, “West to East and East to West: Notes on Cilician Armenian Illumination and the Franciscans in the Thirteenth Century”, in *ΑΝΑΘΗΜΑΤΑ ΕΟΡΤΙΚΑ. Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Matthews*, Helen C. Evans, Thelma K. Thomas eds, Mainz 2009, pp. 148–157.
- 22 Nina G. Garsoïan, *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians*, London 1985; James R. Russell, *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, Cambridge, MA 2004.
- 23 “L’Arménie entre résistance et résilience”, *Roundtable*, January 26, 2023, at the Collège des Bernardins, Paris, recorded [Online: [youtube.com/watch?v=GDvx7FyqXLS&t=5244s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDvx7FyqXLS&t=5244s), last accessed 20.04.23].
- 24 Maranci, “The historiography of Armenian architecture” (n. 12); *Eadem*, “Armenian architecture as Aryan architecture” (n. 12).
- 25 On the topic of the formation of Armenian “identity”, see Anne Elizabeth Redgate, “Myth and Reality: Armenian Identity in the Early Middle Ages”, *National Identities*, IX/4 (2017), pp. 281–306; Theo Marteen van Lint, “The Formation of Armenian Identity in the First Millennium”, *Church History and Religious Culture*, LXXXIX, 1/3 (2009), pp. 251–278; see also Jean-Pierre Mahé, *L’alphabet arménien dans l’histoire et la mémoire. Vie de Machtots par Korioun, Panégyrique des saints traducteurs par Vardan Areveltsi*, Paris 2018; *Des Parthes au Califat. Quatre leçons sur la formation de l’identité arménienne*, Nina G. Garsoïan, Jean-Pierre Mahé eds, Paris 1997.
- 26 On the early period, see Garibian de Vartavan, *La Jérusalem nouvelle* (n. 20); Arevik Parsamyan, “Destruction/sécularisation des temples et premières implantations d’églises en Arménie d’après les données archéologiques”, in *Saint Grégoire l’Illuminateur. Aux commencements de l’Église d’Arménie*, Pascal-Grégoire Delage ed., Royan 2016, pp. 23–60; for the “Golden Age”, see chiefly Donabédian, *L’âge d’or* (n. 14). See also Plontke-Lüning, *Frühchristliche Architektur* (n. 14); Kazarjan, *Cerkovnaia arxitektura* (n. 14); Maranci, *Vigilant Powers* (n. 14). More recently, see also Patrick Donabédian, “L’éclatante couronne de Saint-Serge: le monastère de Xčkônk’ et le dôme en ombrelle dans l’architecture médiévale”, *Revue des études arméniennes*, Ser. NS, XXXVIII (2018/19), pp. 195–355; *Idem*, “Ereruyk’: nouvelles données sur l’histoire du site et de la basilique”, in *Travaux et Mémoires du Centre de Recherche d’Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance*, XVIII (2014) pp. 241–284.



Nazénie Garibian and Patrick Donabédian. The evidence they present confirms that Armenia, in the field of architecture, developed a remarkable architectural culture during Late Antiquity, in constant dialogue with neighboring territories – Georgia, Iran, Syria and Jerusalem²⁷. Studies on liturgical texts and epigraphy have likewise highlighted the constant and two-sided dialogue with sites such as Antioch or Jerusalem²⁸.

But the field of architecture must be expanded to the more elusive culture of monumental decoration – alas often lost – and that, even more difficult to trace, of objects. Both the monumental decors, the ornamental elements, as well as a rich array of archaeological findings stemming from all around the Black Sea, Syria, Iran, the Mediterranean and beyond demonstrate the profound interconnections of the Armenian world with its surroundings. This interconnection, far from being a passive relation to the surrounding realities, is characterized by dynamic relationships. Bronze censers, ampullae from holy sites, textiles, and ivories were not only precious import-export goods but were integrated in all aspects of life and liturgy. These findings, production centers, and objects likely produced by Armenian workshops – such as metalwork crosses – demonstrate the persistent long-distance relationships of Armenia within Eurasia, both to the “West” as well as to the “East”. Armenia, once again, emerges not in isolation, but as a well-connected region²⁹.

Similar conclusions on Armenia’s connectedness can be drawn for the iconography of the few preserved apse-images of late antique Armenia. This concerns namely the apses of the seventh-century churches of T’alin, Aruch and Mren. These apses bear images which, despite their state of preservation, show clear connections between Armenia, Iberia, and the Mediterranean. T’alin’s apse is dominated by the image of an empty chair carrying an open codex [Fig. 5a–b]³⁰. It is a visual concept known throughout the Mediterranean world,



5a/ Apse of the Church of T'alin, end of the 7th century

5b/ Apse of the Church of T'alin, reconstruction by Nikolaj Kotandjan, 2017



6/ Empty Throne, *Homilies of Gregory Nazianzus*, 879–882, Paris, BnF, MS Gr., fol. 355v

but also beyond, for example in India³¹. In this case, however, the composition clearly evokes an installation documented at ecumenical councils at least from 431 onward: the presence of Christ is indicated by placing a text from the gospels above an empty throne [Fig. 6]³². In the council narratives this presence is regarded as evidence of orthodoxy, a fact also proven

27 See, e.g., Annegret Plontke-Lüning, "Jerusalem in Kaukasien. Kirchenbauten und Reliquientraditionen in den ersten christlichen Jahrhunderten", *Archaeologia Circumpontica*, VIII (2012), pp. 27–42. Petrosyan, "Politics, Ideology and Landscape" (n. 20); Armen Kazarjan, Lilit Mikayelyan "Architectural Decorations of Armenian Churches of the 7th and 10th–11th centuries and Their Presumably Sassanian Sources", in *Sasanian Elements in Byzantine, Caucasian and Islamic Art and Culture*, Falko Daim, Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger eds, Heidelberg 2020, pp. 75–91; see also *From Albania to Arrān: The East Caucasus between the Ancient and Islamic Worlds (ca. 330 BCE – 1000 CE)*, Robert G. Hoyland ed., Piscataway, NJ 2020; Yana Tchekhanovets, *The Caucasian Archaeology of the Holy Land: Armenian, Georgian and Albanian Communities between the Fourth and Eleventh Centuries CE*, Leiden 2018.

28 Michael Daniel Findikyan, "The Armenian Ritual of the Dedication of a Church: A Textual and Comparative Analysis of Three Early Sources", *Orientalia christiana periodica*, LXIV (1998), pp. 75–122; Christina Maranci, "The great outdoors: liturgical encounters with the early medieval Armenian church", in *Aural architecture in Byzantium: Music, acoustics, and ritual*, Bissera Pentcheva ed., New York i.a. 2018, pp. 32–51.

29 See, e.g., *Armenia sacra* (n. 1); Timothy Greenwood, "A Corpus of Early Medieval Armenian Silver", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, LXIX (2015), pp. 27–91; Sipana Tchakerian, "Toward a Detailed Typology: Four-Sided Stelae in Early Christian South Caucasus", in *The Medieval South Caucasus: Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia*, Ivan Foletti, Erik Thunø eds = *Convivium. Supplementum* (2016) pp. 124–143.

30 For the monument, with previous bibliography, see Veronika Hermanová, *The Church of Talin*, BA Thesis, Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts, Brno 2020.

31 For this iconography in general see the synthesis by Cornelius Vollmer, *Im Anfang war der Thron. Studien zum leeren Thron in der griechischen, römischen und frühchristlichen Ikonographie*, Rahden 2014. For its presence in Indian context see, e.g., Jeannine Auboyer, "Le trône vide dans la tradition indienne", *Cahiers Archéologiques*, VI (1952), pp. 1–9.

32 For the first documented mention – the letter of Cyrille of Alexandria to Theodosius see Cyril of Alexandria, *S. P. N. Cyrilli Alexandriae Archiepiscopi Operum*, Jean Aubert ed., 6 vols, Paris 1638, VI, *Apologeticus pro XII capitulis adversus Orientales Episcopos*, p. 251. The text was edited also by in the *Patrologia Graeca*, LXXVI, Paris 1859, p. 471. The presence of this installation in the sources has been studied in the thesis by Charidimos Koutris, *The Presence & Authority of the Gospel-Book in the fifth-century Church Councils*, Doctoral thesis, Durham University, Durham 2017.



7a/ View towards the apse, Church of Aruch, ca 660

7b/ Apse of the Church of Aruch, reconstruction by Nikolaj Kotandjan, 2017

in the material culture around the Mediterranean³³. The patron of the church in T'alin is unknown, but through the image in the apse they might be linked to the Chalcedonian party. Christ is represented in the apse standing on a richly decorated pedestal, with an opened *rotulus* in Mren, a church commissioned by the noble Kamsarakan family and built in the years 638/9 as well as in Aruch, which was built under the auspices of Prince Grigor Mamikonyan (r. 662–685). At Aruch – the apse of Mren is lost today – the *rotulus* bears a quotation in Armenian of the Gospel of John to the left side of his figure [Fig. 7a–b]³⁴. The right arm of Christ would probably have been, in both apses, lifted. Such a pose inevitably recalls the widespread image of the standing Christ – traditionally part of the so called “*Traditio Legis*”, a supposedly Romano-centric iconography which most likely adorned the apse of Old St Peter’s – attested on the Italic peninsula, Greece, and Syria starting from the fourth century [Fig. 8]³⁵. Such an image likely came, in the fourth and fifth centuries,



to be a visual affirmation of the Nicene creed³⁶. Its use in seventh-century Armenia could thus be interpreted as a fascinating “revival” of earlier pre-Chalcedonian imagery, perhaps affirming the non-Chalcedonian affiliation of the Armenian church at the time. The use of the Armenian vernacular further supports this claim, transforming this image into an affirmation of distinctive Armenian identity³⁷. Still, we cannot exclude that, as in the case of the Apse of T’alin, such an image could be seen as a visualization of the Chalcedonian orthodoxy, but in this case, expressed through the compromise Monothelite doctrine³⁸. In both cases, however, these images show the elite theological and visual culture of the patrons of these monumental decorations.

Nevertheless, if the message might have differed, in terms of visual culture, the images at T’alin, Aruch and Mren show us a unity of thought which stretched across the late antique Mediterranean. From Santa Costanza in Rome to the doors of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, to Santa Matrona in San Prisco in Capua, to the Rabbula Gospels and

8/ South apse, Santa Costanza, Rome, second half of the 4th century

33 Ivan Foletti, “The book on the throne as image of orthodoxy in late antique Mediterranean (and beyond)”, in *Le livre enluminé médiéval instrument politique*, Vinni Lucherini, Cécile Voyer eds, Rome 2021, pp. 13–32.

34 For the dating of the two churches see e.g. Christina Maranci, “New Observations on the Frescoes at Mren”, in *Revue des études arméniennes*, xxxv (2013), pp. 203–225 and Karen Mat’evosyan, *Arovč [Aruch]*, Yerevan 1987; Kazarjan, *Cerkovnaja arhitektura* (n. 14), vol. 2, pp. 164–183, vol. 3, pp. 72–105. Regarding the frescoes, see Kotandjan, *Monumental’ naja živopis’* (n. 20); Zaruhi Hakobyan, “Monumental’ naja živopis’ Armenii VII stoletija v kontekste vostočnoxristianskoj tradicii [Armenian monumental painting of the 7th century in the context of Eastern Christian tradition]”, in *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art 6: Collection of Articles*, Saint Petersburg 2016, pp. 133–142; Karen Metevoşyan, *Haykakan ormnankarch’ ut’ jum [Armenian Frescoes: Collection of Scientific Articles and Materials]*, Yerevan 2019; Veronika Džugan Hermanová, *Monumental Painting of Early Medieval Armenia and Georgia: Crossroad of Byzantine and Eastern Churches*, MA Thesis, Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts, Brno 2022, with previous bibliography.

35 See the last publication on the question, with previous bibliography: Yves Christe, “Une image peut en cacher une autre: le décor absidal du Vieux-Saint-Pierre à Rome”, *Antiquité tardive*, 28 (2020), pp. 235–245. On the myth of the “Traditio Legis” see the synthesis by Ivan Foletti, Irene Quadri, “Roma, l’Oriente e il mito della Traditio Legis”, in *Opuscula Historiae Artium. Supplementum* (2013), pp. 16–37.

36 See mainly Jean-Michel Spieser, *Autour de la Traditio Legis*, Thessaloniki 2004.

37 See a similar idea developed in Cassandre Lejosne, “L’image et le Verbe dans l’abside”, *Chronozones: Bulletin des sciences de l’Antiquité de l’Université de Lausanne* (2020), pp. 12–17.

38 Hermanová, *Monumental Painting* (n. 34).

to the apse of T'alin, Aruch and Mren, common patterns emerge in Late Antiquity all around the Mediterranean and beyond³⁹. The recurrence of these patterns throughout Armenian visual culture testifies to their efficacy and importance. The papers of Zaruhi Hakobyan and Lilit Mikayelyan provide further evidence in this direction, focusing on the one hand on the long life of the peculiar image of St Christopher Cynocephalus and on the other on the “commonality” between ornamental motives in Persia and Armenia which united an artistic world that was unpartitioned by modern national boundaries.

This volume of *Convivium* is just one step toward the goal of de-compartmentalizing and reconstructing a more complex image of late antique Armenia. It inscribes itself in a series of volumes which, starting with the 2016 *Supplementum* on the Southern Caucasus, promotes a space of dialogue for the study of the artistic cultures of the Mediterranean, Western Asia, and the greater world. It responds to another volume on Medieval Iberia published in 2021 and is published in the same year as another supplementary volume of *Convivium* on Svaneti – medieval Iberia’s mountainous treasury⁴⁰. All these volumes reflect *Convivium*’s endeavors to refocus scholarly attention on those regions which have been marginalized by the weight of art history’s traditions. Only a double gaze – historiographical and art-historical – can disentangle the sticky web of these conventional positions. The place of Armenia in the “nomadism” of images, to borrow an image dear to Hans Belting, is indeed not that of a marginal entity, but of a truly driving force which mirrors the resilience of its monuments and population.

39 Vollmer, *Im Anfang war der Thron* (n. 31), pp. 354–410; Chiara Croci, *Una “questione campana”. La prima arte monumentale cristiana tra Napoli, Nola e Capua (secc. IV–VI)*, Rome 2017, pp. 241–253; Joachim Rasch, Achim Arbeiter, *Das Mausoleum der Constantina in Rom*, Mainz 2007, pp. 109–152; Massimo Bernabò, *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula: Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 1.56; l’illustrazione del Nuovo Testamento nella Siria del VI secolo*, Rome 2008; *Idem*, “The Miniatures in the Rabbula Gospels: Postscripta to a Recent Book”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, LXVIII (2014), pp. 343–358.

40 *The Medieval South Caucasus* (n. 29); *Georgia as a Bridge between Cultures: Dynamics of Artistic Exchange*, Manuela Studer-Karlen, Natalia Chitishvili, Thomas Kaffenberger eds = *Convivium. Supplementum* (2021); *Medieval Svaneti: Objects, Images, and Bodies in Dialogue with Built and Natural Spaces*, Manuela Studer-Karlen, Michele Bacci, Natalia Chitishvili eds = *Convivium. Supplementum* (2023).

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