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Mario Parise

Carla Galeazzi, Roberto Bixio, Carlo Germani



ARMENIAN CENTRAL DOME CHURCHES, THE ISSUE OF THEIR ROCK CARVED SAMPLES AND THE MIPHOLOGICAL BASES OF ARMENIAN ARCHITECTURE

Samvel M. Shahinyan

*Doctor in Architecture, National University of Architecture and Construction, Armenia, Yerevan, Teryan st.105
armspeleo@yahoo.com*

Abstract

According to the literature and possible dating of the preserved monuments, rock-carved central domed churches were built perhaps during the X-XIII centuries, at least in the Armenian area of the former USSR. This was a period when church was largely controlling the state power in the country, given the fact that the state was only coming into a shabby existence from time to time. It is worth remembering here that Zakaryans were in fact a Georgian princely house, and the refugee children of the rulers of fortress, just for satisfying their ambitious aspirations, were looking for new arenas until the time when Stepanos Orbelyan became the Catholicos. Thus the church built the temple of Christ and the Light underground to deny itself, while it was protected by God from the very beginning, and there was no need to cover it up, at least from the religious-ideological point of view. The church attempt and mainly succeeded in burying for a long time the perceptions of the tree of life and the universe among people. The tree of life was not coming out of the bowels of the earth anymore, meaning that it could not give fruits; however, the impact of the light falling from the circular hole dug for the round ball underneath the dome cross was definitely alleviating the strength of the public demand of remembering the traditions of the past and continuously progressing, since Christ was already observed from there.

Keywords: Armenian cruciform-planned churches, mystical philosophy, tree of life, sacred trinity.

Riassunto

Secondo la letteratura e le possibili datazioni dei monumenti conservati, le chiese a cupola centrale scolpite nella roccia furono realizzate nel corso dei secoli X-XIII, almeno nella zona armena dell'ex URSS. Fu questo un periodo nel quale la chiesa mantenne in larga parte anche il controllo politico del paese, perché lo Stato si limitava a sopravvivere ad una squallida esistenza. Vale la pena ricordare che gli Zakaryans erano in realtà membri di un casato principesco georgiano. I figli dei governanti della fortezza venivano spinti a soddisfare le loro ambiziose aspirazioni, alla costante ricerca di nuove arene, fino al momento in cui Stepanos Orbelian divenne il Catholicos. La chiesa costruì il tempio di Cristo e la luce sotto la terra a rinnegare se stessa, mentre era protetta da Dio fin dall'inizio e non ci sarebbe stato bisogno di nascondersela, almeno dal punto di vista religioso-ideologico. Il tentativo della chiesa è riuscito nell'intento di tenere sepolta per lungo tempo la percezione dell'albero della vita e dell'universo. L'albero della vita non uscì più dalle viscere della terra e non dette più frutti. Ma la luce che entrava dal foro circolare ricavato sotto la cupola aiutava a ricordare le tradizioni del passato e a progredire (n.d.r.: nella tradizione cristiana l'albero rappresenta la vita dello spirito, tanto che il Cristo è insieme sole ed albero).

Parole chiave: chiese a croce centrale armene, filosofia mistica, albero della vita, Sacra Trinità.

In the Armenian architecture, in the compositions of central dome churches, harmonic commonalities have been repeated with amazing consistency over the last one and a half millennia. Beyond the general formation, there are meaningful symbols; such symbols are visible even on the walls of churches. Presence of both planning commonalities and the meaningful symbols are certainly a demonstration of continuity of the ancient Armenian culture. We can see the same strong-minded consistency towards the symbols and composition (context) of the form also in the composition of *khachkars* (cross stones).

Architecture of central dome churches, as a classical model and principle structures that are radically different from other compositions, were recorded for the first time by TOROS TOROMANYAN. Later on, in the XX century, scientific research and publications were provided by STRZHIGOVSKI, TOKARSKI, JAKOBSON, YARALOV, MNATSAKANYAN, CHUBINASHVILI, SAFARYAN, TAGHAYSHVILI,

KHALPAKHCHYAN and others. V. GRIGORYAN published in 1982 the monograph "Early medieval central dome small monuments of Armenia" that brings together all the previous work and makes a typological classification.

However, our objective is to reveal the bases of emergence of central dome churches and the reasons at the origin of their underground versions.

Scientific and mythological bases of the research

To resolve our scientific problem, we will consider the circular mausoleums so common among the Indo-European populations, regardless of their soil-hill or stone-hill types, with square or rectangular grave in the center. We will also consider dolmens and cromlechs. We consider that Armenian petroglyphs are other important scientific bases. From the Christian period, we will present the Christian and pre-Christian megalithic monuments using the symbolic principle

of petroglyphs as well as *khachkar*. From the epic perspective, the bases of this research are perceptions of ancient Armenians about the structure of universe.

Research

The apparently emphasized conservatism in the church and *khachkar* architecture, which is expressed by the stability of forms and styles in the course of centuries, cannot but have a definite and clear explanation. In the medieval architectural compositions of the Armenian church – both in volume/spatial and in projective structures – there are some symmetries that cannot be justified by the creator’s knowledge only. This is particularly pronounced in the case of central dome churches with cruciform plan. As a result of our thirty-year-long research, we have revealed principles that were continuously used and repeated in church architecture in different centuries and which are rooted in the ancient Armenian mythological-philosophical notions about the structure of the Universe.

The viability of the outlook of the Armenian people formed on the pantheistic framework of thousands of years demonstrated in stone, *khachkar* art, as well as in the architecture of churches, tells about the continuity of the culture of the Armenian people, regardless of its different manifestations in different historic periods. It is essential to understand that Armenians, while adopting Christianity, did not change our concept on the functions and coordination of natural items, phenomena and factors, nor did we deny the mythological models of the past about the universe; we simply accepted another spiritual concept, the spiritual and humanitarian principles of which are much higher and incomparably more focused on the development of the overall human civilization, and are not in contradiction with the previous spiritual concepts. However, most of the ancient knowledge is now lost. There is a vital need to excavate the folds of history and, exhibiting both mythological and cryptographic treasury piece by piece, complete and possess the philosophical spiritual treasures.

In the event of decoding the cryptographic meanings of the tree of life, the traditional constructive trinity of churches gain a meaning in windows of churches framed with depictions of two cosmic mythological elements (dragon, water, black water, purple sea, which divide the regulated universe of the good and the evil and protect it from the endless chaos), doors, defensive towers (Ani), *khachkars*, the boundaries of the field occupied by the image of the Tree of Life in the form of a cross figure, etc. in numerous examples of using the symbol of the sacred act of creation in small size architectural monuments (Odzun); in stylization of church entrances, use of the symbol of the fruit of the Tree of Life in the form of the new symbol of Holy Cross adapted and having become meaningful by Christianity; use of the Earth’s quarter angle symbol in petroglyphs, cryptography and in pictographs, under the church domes characterizing the celestial sphere. Moreover, it is characterized by the four sides of the world and, simultaneously, the four elements – earth, fire, water, air – depicted in the forms of man, goat, bull,



Fig. 1: Armenian central domed churches in the Khosrov.
 Fig. 1: *Chiese armena a cupola centrale in Khosrov.*

and eagle; three, five or seven square-shaped platforms in the foundations of churches or in compositions serving as pedestals for monuments, placed over each other, developing upwards and characterizing the bowels of the earth.

Outcomes

In IV–III millennia B.C., a principle was formed in mausoleum building, with the main characteristics of its architecture being the stone hill or soil hill with circular shape, which has a form of a sphere in its section, with the bottom placed on the earth’s surface. The square or rectangular stone-box mausoleum was in the center, covered with one or, more frequently, several flagstones. The mausoleum itself has in its section a development towards the bowels of the earth, with the surface of its flagstone cover coinciding with the surface of the bottom of the stone hill or the surface of earth. During diggings, remains of a deceased have been discovered very often, contracted like an embryo. Burials in this position symbolize the idea of embryo or seed, which assumes the opportunity of rebirth or giving a new life to the deceased. If we look at these structures from the angle of the ancient Armenian perceptions of the structure of the universe, we will see that both the architecture of mausoleums and the ritual ideology of burial lead to the model of ancient perceptions about the universe, and to the tree of life. The concept of the three-dimensional structure of the universe can be seen also in the architecture of Sumerian and Mesopotamian *zikkurats*. We are making this reference because, according to a number of researchers, until the end of the II millennium B.C. a sole cultural environment covered all the area from the Armenian Highland to Mehengo-Daro, and it is also possible that they were speaking the same language. In Zikkurat architecture, each of the stairways represents a certain sphere: bowels of the earth, earth and sky, which used to be colored black, white and yellow,

respectively. The temple of sun or divinity was placed in the third floor symbolizing the sky. In their plan, Zikkurats have a square shape. In ancient and even medieval perceptions of Armenians about the earth, God has created the earth in square or four-sided shape. The architecture of the early medieval central dome churches had a characteristic feature, which stopped to be circulated in later periods. The church was girded with a few levels of masonry, mainly three. We can name it a “pedestal” since here the celestial sense of the church was meant; meaning, it stands above everything earthly. The staircases symbolize the bowels of the earth-earth-sky system, wherefrom the Temple of God rises.

Another characteristic architectural trick is that the cross placed in the dome occupies the center of the plan, something that is impossible in case of basilica church. This means that the composition of a central dome church is such that the believers are “directly linked” with the God, something that in case of basilica or other churches is more often the monopoly of the priest since the stage, from the constructive standpoint, is mainly located under the cross-decorated tower.

The tree of life, numerous versions of which can be come across in the panoramas of petroglyphs as well as in Armenian medieval miniatures and carpet weaving art, is also based on the ancient Armenian mythological perceptions of trinity. The roots of the tree of life are in the bowels of the earth; it branches on the earth and then in the sky where - in a separate sphere - the bud gives birth to the Light or the light-bringing sun.

Conclusions

The first important fact that we affirmed during our research is the transformation of the spiritual approaches and ancient perceptions of the structure of the universe repeated over six thousand years in diverse material manifestations of art and architecture. The ancient Armenian mythology has served as a basis for creating the fundamental matrix of both circular mausoleums with stone-hill foundations of the III to I millennium B.C. and for compositions of *khachkars* and central dome churches. Based on this, Armenian masters have in later times created *khachkars* and numerous monuments with central dome cruciform plan, in which, however, there are very little deviations from the principles of the fundamental matrix.

The second important finding is that a people who lives in its own biotope, as an ethnic unit, has continuously preserved, reproduced anew and developed the national culture appropriate to the requirements of the time. We do not observe this phenomenon in cultural developments of the groups of people, colonies who have left their native biotopes. This means that the indigenous culture can be preserved and developed only by the people who have created that culture, provided they do not leave their native biotope. Typical examples are the architectural cultures created by the Greeks and the Romans in Egypt, Great Britain, Bactria and elsewhere, where the settlers and indigenous peoples are now alienated from those culture sat all.

The above statements partially contradict with the fact

that the ancestors of Armenians were carving central dome cruciform-planned churches in rocks, i.e. in the bowels of the earth. Does this mean that they denied the unearthly and even un heavenly mystic dogmas of the church? We can confidently assure – no; in fact, two principles were functioning: the religious policies of the Armenian Church and the public demand. According to the data of literature and possible dating of the preserved monuments, rock-carved central dome churches were built perhaps in X-XIII centuries, at least in the Armenian area of the former USSR. This was a period when church was largely controlling the state power in the country, given the fact that the state was only coming into a shabby existence from time to time. It is worth remembering here that Zakaryans were in fact a Georgian princely house, and the refugee children of the rulers of fortress, just for satisfying their ambitious aspirations, were looking for new arenas until the time when Stapanos Orbelyan became the Catholicos.

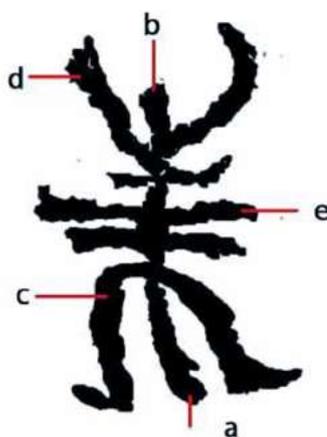
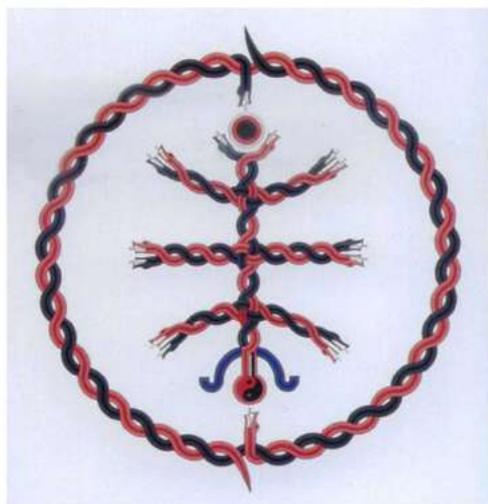
Thus the church built the temple of Christ and the Light under the ground to deny itself, while it was protected by God from the very beginning, and there was no need to cover it up, at least from the religious-ideological point of view.

The church attempted and mainly succeeded in burying for a long time the perceptions of the tree of life and the universe among people. The tree of life was not coming out of the bowels of the earth anymore; meaning it could not give fruits; however, the impact of the light falling from the circular hole dug for the round ball underneath the dome cross was definitely alleviating the strength of the public demand of remembering the traditions of the past and continuously progressing, since Christ was already observed from there.

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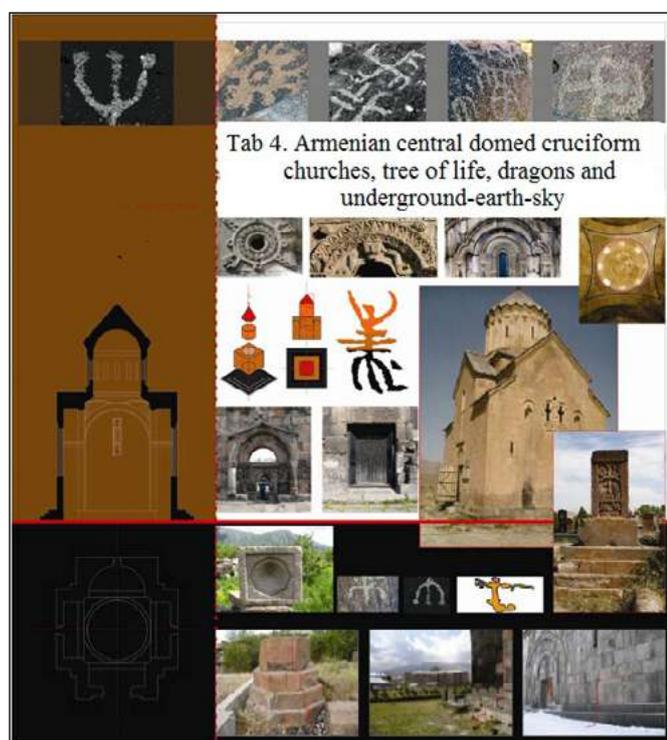
Table 1. The armenian phetroglphes, Tree-Lafe and rock old monuments



Tab. 1: The Armenian petroglyphs, Tree of Life and rock old monument.
Tav. 1: I petroglifi armeni, l'Albero della Vita e antichi monumenti in pietra.



Tab. 3: Martiros, Khouts, Hochanc and other churches hollowed out in rocks.
Tav. 3: Martiros, Khouts, Hochanc e altre chiese scavate nella roccia.



Tab. 4: Armenian central domed cruciform churches, Tree of Life, dragons and underground-earth-sky.

Tav. 4: Chiese armene con cupola centrale a croce, Albero della Vita, draghi e sotterranei terra-cielo.

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