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FACULTY OF ARTS

**The Monumental Painting of Early Medieval
Armenia and Georgia**

The crossroad of Byzantine and Eastern Churches

Master's thesis

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I hereby declare that the thesis titled **The Monumental Painting of Early Medieval Armenia and Georgia: The Crossroad of Byzantine and Eastern Churches** that I have submitted for assessment is entirely my original work, and that no part of it has been taken from the work of others unless explicitly cited and acknowledged within the text of my thesis.

Brno October 11, 2022

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1. INTRODUCTION

When studying the early medieval Armenian painting, any researcher dealing with the topic must overcome several obstacles. At the very beginning, the biggest challenge consists of the fragmentary material, often in a very bad state of preservation. The material was until recently practically impossible to study in situ, because even if the paintings survived, they were badly visible. This changed only recently with the restorative interventions of Zarian and Lamoureux, which finally allowed to properly see the paintings. Before that it was only possible to study the monumental painting through the literature. However, the key bibliography was written mostly in Russian and many important materials were, and still are, hidden in little notebooks in Archives of the National Gallery of Armenia. But if one is able to overcome the language barrier, the writings of Durnovo, Kotandjyan, Der Nersessian, Thierry's and many others allow to create a corpus of very precious Early Christian images with enormous potential for interpretation.

At this point it must be stressed out how rare it is to discover a set of seventh century images with identical iconography, in very similar architectural and geographical setting. Such images should not be studied merely as works of art, but rather as a precious historical material. That is why the aim of this thesis is to study the paintings in their historical and theological context. I will pick up the threads of Maranci and Foletti's research and ask the long-time neglected questions. Do the seventh century Armenian monumental paintings have special liturgical function, or do they contain any concrete dogmatic and Christological meaning? What is the role of Byzantine empire in conception of those images and what does it have to say about the seventh century Armenia? I will try to find the answers by comparing the images with artistic production of other Eastern Christian countries, such as Syria, Egypt and Palestine, but also with Georgian and Cappadocian monumental art which is stylistically and iconographically related. I will approach the material as evidence of a long forgotten historical epoch by applying onto it the latest art historical and historical theories. In short, I would like to add an up-to-date analysis of the seventh century monumental painting in the

catalogue of Late Antique / early medieval art and make it thus available for further research. To achieve it I will divide the thesis in these four chapters:

The state of research, which is the topic of the first chapter, examines the history of studies on Armenian seventh century monumental painting in the light of contemporary politics. The chapter will illustrate, how the perspective of scholars changed in different political context, but most importantly, it will try to understand, how the scholarship is shaped by the fear that opening new questions might cause losing the artworks and with them also the history.

The second chapter will follow with analysis of seventh-century monuments which preserved some well documented monumental painting decorations. Although the main focus will be placed on the paintings, their state of research and state of preservation, I will stress out also the architectural and historical context of every monument. The chapter will serve as an updated catalogues of Armenian seventh century monumental painting, dealing with paintings in Aruch, Talin, Mren, Lmbat, Kosh, Karmravor, Mastara and Cromi.

The following two chapters will be concerned with analysis and interpretation of iconography identified in the catalogue. While the third chapter will analyze the paintings in Aruch, Mren, Cromi and Talin, the fourth chapter will be dealing with the images of Christ in Glory, Holy Martyrs on a Horseback and the overall meaning of the entire apsidal compositions. The question will linger through the iconographical analysis, whether the origin of those monumental painting is in some way connected to Armenian rejection of the council of Chalcedon. Especially the chapter called Images of Orthodoxy will try to answer that question through the means of two images – the standing Christ with and open scroll and an open book on a throne – and by applying the knowledge of latest art historical, theological, and historical research. As a result, the images will be re-classified, re-interpreted and in some cases also re-dated.

2. STATE OF RESEARCH

2.1. *Is there such a thing as Armenian monumental painting?*

Armenian medieval wall painting is a minor branch of Armenian art history, which is dominated by architectural and manuscript studies. This is surprising since today we know about at least thirty Armenian churches with preserved fragments of wall paintings.¹ We can only imagine how many of them disappeared without ever being documented in writing. Many of them are dated to the Early Middle Ages, or rather, the Late Antiquity (from the fifth to the seventh century). This very precious historical material is still understudied to this day, and often abandoned to the tender mercies of nature or human vagaries.

The reasons behind the lack of interest are complex, however, the most plausible explanation is that the Armenian Church was for a long time considered to be iconoclastic. Such notions were born out of a chain of faults and misunderstandings, which were eventually turned into a broadly accepted historical fact.² Irina Rubenovna Drampyan (*1939) explains, how after the refusal of the Council of Chalcedon by the Armenian Church in 506, the Byzantine church started to falsely consider the Armenian Church as monophysite and hostile to images. In the Byzantine Church, especially after the period of “Iconoclasm,” the accusation of refusal of images became an effective way used by Byzantines to discredit its enemies.³ In reality, there were sects hostile to images in Armenia, such as the Paulicians (active during the seventh century) or the Tondraks (active between the ninth and the eleventh centuries), but the official Armenian Church never acted against images.⁴

The feigned “iconoclastic” position of the Armenian Church should thus be considered as a historiographical construct built up during the entire nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century when Armenian art started to be discovered by the

¹ Hakobyan 2016, p. 136.

² Kotanjyam 2017, pp. 30-31; Drampyan 2018, p. 238. More on that later in the text.

³ On Byzantine iconoclasm see Brubaker 2012.

⁴ Kotanjyam 2017, pp. 30-31; Drampyan 2018, p. 238.

scholarly community, the false iconoclastic position of the Armenian Church was already considered an unquestionable fact. These consequences can still be felt today.⁵ While at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Armenian architecture was being praised by both Western and Russian researchers, and the fresco painting were neglected and misunderstood. The famous Austrian scholar Josef Strzygowski (1862–1941) for example, paid enormous attention to Armenian architecture during his travels around Armenia in 1913.⁶ His research resulted in a nine-hundred-page publication presenting complex theories on Armenian architecture. However, when it comes to frescoes decorating the walls of the churches, they were only briefly mentioned. Strzygowski was convinced that the Armenian churches of the Early Christian period were not decorated with human figures, and the wall paintings he saw in the churches were, according to him, brought to the country by Greeks and Syrians.⁷

It was the Russian philologist and amateur archeologist Nikolay Marr (1864–1934), who finally opened the question of Armenian monumental painting.⁸ Marr led the famous excavation campaigns in Ani at the beginning of the twentieth century, where he started to notice frescoes from various periods decorating Armenian architecture.⁹ At first, he assigned them to Greeks and Georgians – the Chalcedonian Christians of the medieval Ani.¹⁰ Though, later he changed his mind and proposed a new solution. According to Marr, the frescoes of Ani were created by a special branch of Armenians – those who accepted the dogma of Chalcedon.¹¹ All the churches of Ani which were decorated with frescoes were, thus, identified by Marr as Chalcedonian ones. This hypothesis was based solely on Marr's assumptions, and according to Irina Drampyan, it certainly cannot be considered a scholarly, well-argued conclusion.¹² Nevertheless, it had a far-reaching impact on the following generations of researchers. Although Marr was dealing with churches dating from the tenth century onwards, his conclusions also affected scholars dealing with early medieval Armenian frescoes.

⁵ Among the first studies on Armenian art are Choisy 1889; Marr 1899; Marr 1906; Thoromanyan 1911; Schmit 1915–1916; Strzygowski 1918. For the very first Russian studies of Southern Caucasus see Foletti, Rakitin 2018.

⁶ On Strzygowski see Maranci 2001.

⁷ Strzygowski 1918, p. 302.

⁸ On Marr see Choisnel 2005.

⁹ On Ani see *Ani: world architectural heritage* 2001; *Ani at the Crossroad* 2019.

¹⁰ Marr 1899; Marr 1906.

¹¹ Marr 1934.

¹² Kotandjyan 2017, pp. 31–32; Drampyan 2018, p. 236.

Marr's research was interrupted by the First World War and consequent events, which resulted in Ani being proclaimed as part of Turkey, and thus, inaccessible.¹³ It took many decades until Marr's findings could be reevaluated. Meanwhile, the new-born Republic of Armenia was attached to the Soviet Union very soon after its birth, and the frescoes located on the territory of Soviet Armenia started to be studied based on Marr's legacy.

2.2 Lydia Durnovo and the first research

In the Soviet Armenia in the 1930s, the National Gallery of Armenia created a new department of Medieval art. The idea of the director Ruben Drampyan (1891–1991) was that the Gallery was supposed to serve as an encyclopedia of Armenian art in which every period must be represented.¹⁴ In 1936, the Russian artist Lydia Alexandrovna Durnovo (1885–1963) was invited to the National Gallery to create copies of Armenian frescoes and miniatures for the newly opened department. At that time, Durnovo was already a well-established expert on copying monumental painting. She published several pieces on the methodology of copying, and copied frescoes from Novgorod, Pskov, Vladimir, Kiev and many others.¹⁵ Nevertheless, in 1933, Durnovo was accused of participation in a “contra revolutionary fascist organization” and was sent to Siberia for three years.¹⁶ Thus, when the invitation to Armenia arrived, Durnovo gladly accepted it. Durnovo traveled around Soviet Armenia documenting, copying, and sometimes even restoring preserved fresco fragments.¹⁷ The life-size fresco copies are exhibited in the National Gallery of Armenia in Yerevan to this day; among them are the frescos of Lmbat, Aruch, Ahtala and Tatev.¹⁸ Moreover, Durnovo's travel notebooks are of immense importance for next generations of researchers, since they often contain unique records of paintings which vanished in the following decades.

Durnovo's contribution as a copyist is unquestionable. But she was also the very first person studying monumental painting of Armenia from an art historical perspective. Her

¹³ On Armenia and the First World War and the Armenian Genocide and see Suny 2015.

¹⁴ Kotandjyan 2017, p. 25.

¹⁵ Durnovo 1979, p. 8.

¹⁶ Durnovo 1979, pp. 8–9.

¹⁷ Drampyan 2018, p. 241.

¹⁸ Kotanjyan 2017, pp. 25; Drampyan 2018, p. 240.

findings were published in several essays, while a huge amount of her research is still hidden in her notebooks.¹⁹ Concerning the early medieval period, the most important works of Durnovo are four essays on monumental painting in Armenia: *Древние фрески Армении*, in *Очерки по истории искусства Армении* (Ancient Armenian frescoes, in Essays on Armenian art history), *Стенная живопись в Аруче (Талиш)* [Wall paintings in Aruch (Talish)], *Краткая история древнеармянской живописи* (Brief history of ancient Armenian painting), *Стенная живопись*, in *Очерки изобразительного искусства средневековой Армении* (Monumental painting, in Essays on fine arts of medieval Armenia), the latest composed by her former students and published posthumously.²⁰ The essays stood not only for catalogues of Armenian fresco painting, where for the first time all preserved fragments of frescoes were described in detail, but also presented Durnovo's ideas on the stylistic development and the origin of Armenian painting.

In her essays, Durnovo tries to put Armenian monumental painting into context of early medieval art by comparing it with other monuments from the Byzantine and Eastern Christian world. She identifies traces of Sasanian, Syrian, Roman, Byzantine, Arabic, Mongol and other cultures in Armenian art. Durnovo even recognizes that while some seventh-century Armenian churches were executed in a more Eastern (Syrian and Palestinian) style, others were, on the contrary, more Roman and Greek looking. However, main conclusions of Durnovo did not differ from European trends of that time. Her goal was clear: to create a corpus of Armenian national medieval painting. Durnovo thus states that although there are features of foreign cultures, those cultures never had a real impact on Armenian painting, which always preserved its special quality and original style.²¹

Durnovo was convinced that the tradition of painting in Armenia was uninterrupted since Antiquity. The Armenian Hellenistic art slowly evolved into Armenian early medieval art and so on, up to the nineteenth century. Moreover, Durnovo spotted traces of the Hellenistic style surviving in every epoch of Armenian painting, especially in ornamental decorations such as the ornamental frieze under the conch of the Aruch cathedral.²² Those

¹⁹ Archive of Lydia Durnovo in the National Gallery of Armenia in Yerevan is very rich. Her followers were able to compose several books only out of her notes and drawings and an enormous amount of material was still not fully processed.

²⁰ Durnovo 1939; Durnovo 1952; Durnovo 1957; Durnovo 1979.

²¹ Durnovo 1957, pp. 3–5.

²² Durnovo 1952, pp. 50–53.

traces, however, were not adopted from Byzantium, but were surviving in Armenian art since the time of Hellenism and were revived again and again in every epoch.

Durnovos' research was unfortunately limited by the Soviet state, as she was not able to study monuments outside the borders of Soviet Armenia. Despite that, she did not hesitate to incorporate them in her essays, even though her sources were sometimes outdated. Consequences of such limitation can be felt also on the way the scholar deals with the question of Chalcedonism in early medieval Armenian art. Durnovo partially inherited Marr's approach when she explains the absence of frescoes in some seventh-century Armenian churches by the division between Monophysite and Dyophysite churches among Armenia. However, her approach is more thoughtful as she recognizes that Monophysitism did not explicitly forbid paintings in churches, but that Dyophysitism encouraged it, and so Monophysites rejected it. Durnovo also claims that there were more Chalcedonians among the seventh-century Armenian aristocracy, and most of the churches that are painted must be assigned to them.²³ Unfortunately, Durnovo never knew about the research running simultaneously with hers on the other side of the world, which definitively dismissed such claims.²⁴

Sirarpe Der Nersessian (1896–1989), an Armenian genocide survival from Constantinople who eventually became a Harvard University professor, one of the first senior fellows of Dumbarton Oaks, an expert on Byzantine manuscripts and one of the pioneers of Armenian art history, published two articles in the '40s on the issue of iconoclasm in the Armenian Church. The aim of these articles was to once and for all dismiss claims about the iconoclastic position of the Armenian Church. Der Nersessian translated and commented the treatise of Vrtanes Kertogh, written by a seventh-century Armenian monk and poet, called "Concerning iconoclasts."²⁵ The treatise happened to be the earliest debatable defense of images in any language. The text not only proves that the seventh century Armenian churches were decorated with monumental painting, but it clearly shows that the official Armenian Church defended images against iconophobic sects. In her second article called "The Image Worship in Armenia and its Opponents," Der Nersessian makes it

²³ Durnovo 1957, pp. 8–9.

²⁴ For example, in 1959, the author claims that the work of Sirarpe der Nersessian was not known in Soviet Armenia see Durnovo 1979, p. 9.

²⁵ Der Nersessian 1944–1945.

very clear that the Armenian church was never opposed to images or to certain forms of image-worship.²⁶

Even after such definite conclusions, Der Nersessian's ideas were not fully accepted. The main reason behind this, was the prevailing notion that only a few Armenian churches preserved some traces of painting, and that the majority of them bear absolutely no pictorial decorations. The article of Glia Banateanu from 1958 on Armenian frescoes from ancient times and Middle Ages represents a middle-ground perspective.²⁷ The author already refers to Der Nersessian and the writing of Vrtanes Kertogh, but also notes the "relative" poverty of frescoes in Armenian churches, since there are "only" thirty preserved examples of monumental painting in Armenia. Banateanu set a goal to establish, whether there truly were favorable conditions for monumental painting in Armenia, and to determine whether the anti-Chalcedonism of the Armenian Church is the reason behind the total absence of Armenian frescoes in certain centuries. Banateanu concludes that after the council of Chalcedon, the Armenian Church showed tendency to prevent frescos by using only ornamentation, but did not put much energy into it. This would explain, according to Banateanu, why the frescoes in Armenia still exist during the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, but are not as numerous as in Byzantium. For Banateanu, the relative poverty of surviving material serves as a proof of the silent struggle between the Armenian Church and the supporters of painting between the fifth and the seventh century.²⁸

It took another decade to show that the official Armenian church was never iconoclastic. However, for Der Nersessian this question was already solved, and she was ready to move on. In 1965, she gave a paper on the twelfth international congress of Byzantine studies called "*La peinture arménienne au VII siècle et les miniatures de l'Evangile d'Etchmiadzin.*"²⁹ In the paper, the scholar dates three folios attached to the Etchmiadzin Gospel into the sixth century, by comparing them to apsidal compositions in Lmbat and Talin. Der Nersessian was convinced that the miniatures were painted by an Armenian master, and she stresses out the Theophanic character of the depicted scenes which corresponds with Theophanic visions preserved in apses of Armenian churches. Most

²⁶ Der Nersessian 1946, pp. 80–81.

²⁷ Banateanu 1958.

²⁸ Ibidem, pp. 60–61.

²⁹ Der Nersessian 1965.

importantly, for the first time, Der Nersessian compares the Armenian miniature painting with monumental painting, and opens the discussion on whether such scenes as preserved in the Etchmiadzin Gospel could once have decorated the walls of Armenian churches.³⁰

2.3 Contribution of a new generation

While Armenian monuments located in Soviet Armenia became a domain of Soviet researchers, the ones located in Eastern Turkey were hardly accessible for everyone and almost fully forgotten. The situation started to change in the mid-1950s. A pair of physicians – Jean-Michel Thierry (1916–2011) and Nicole Thierry (*1925) undertook countless expeditions to Eastern Turkey and published a corpus of many unknown or little-known monuments in the area.³¹ While Jean-Michel Thierry studied the architecture, Nicole Thierry paid attention mostly to sculptural decorations and fresco remains. The Thierrys visited the cathedral of Mren three times during the 60s. Their work resulted in a published article in *Cahiers archéologiques* in 1971.³² The article contains the first detail description of surviving fragments of the Mren apsidal fresco. The scholars not only rediscovered the fresco for western researchers, but also created a new narrative for Armenian seventh-century fresco painting. They classified the painting as a particular form of post-Justinian Byzantine art, and for the first time, Armenian painting has been interpreted as a result of multicultural cooperation on the borders of the Byzantine empire.

Nicole Thierry proceeded with this interpretation in her paper for the twentieth *Corso di Cultura sull'Arte Ravennate e Bizantina*. At the conference Thierry presented two papers. In the paper on the medieval painting of Armenia, Thierry interpreted seventh-century frescoes of Aruch, Talin, Lmbat, Kosh and Mren as belonging to the decorative campaign of the proto-Byzantine period, with a schematic oriental style, and a universal primitive iconography.³³ However, the period from the sixth to the beginning of the eighth century was, according to Thierry, an exceptional case. When it comes to the following centuries, Thierry introduced Armenia as entirely isolated from the Byzantine world due to Monophysitism and its concern for political independence. The country, according to her, lived from its

³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 55–57.

³¹ Maranci 2001, p. 220. Jean-Michel Thierry was a surgeon and Nicole Thierry is an anesthetist.

³² Thierry, Thierry 1971.

³³ Thierry 1973, p. 399.

paleo-Christian past having relations only with other Eastern Christian countries, and if there were some exchanges with the Chalcedonian church, they were only particular cases.³⁴ If there are any paintings in Armenian churches from the ninth century and onward, they are of Georgian or Chalcedonian origin. On the other hand, the medieval painting of Georgia was presented in the second paper as a fusion of Syro-Palestinian and Byzantine traditions, with a foremost interest on the study of Byzantine art.³⁵ Such classification of Armenian painting was not well received in Armenia. Irina Drampyan later accused Thierry of being Georgiophile, whose aim was to seize the Armenian fresco painting from Armenian art.³⁶

In Armenia in the 70s, a new generation took over Durnovo's unfinished research. An artist and theoretician Nikolay Gareginovich Kotandjyan (1928–2013) turned his interest towards the Early Medieval monumental painting of Armenia as the least studied field of Armenian art history.³⁷ Kotandjyan followed the path of Lydia Durnovo and spent his career documenting, cleaning, and sometimes even restoring frescoes all over Soviet Armenia. His findings were published in several papers and two monographs; one of them was composed posthumously by Irina Drampyan in 2017.³⁸ In his first monograph called *Цвет в раннесредневековой живописи Армении. Анализ памятников IV – VII веков* [Color in early medieval painting of Armenia. The analysis of monuments of the 4th–7th centuries], Kotandjyan developed a new methodology based on tonality, composition, and spatial structure of colors used in early medieval Armenian frescoes.³⁹ The method enabled Kotandjyan to study the frescoes from a purely positivistic point of view, in which the composition and quality of colors served as an argument for stylistic analysis and dating.

Kotandjyan's research basically confirms the observation of Lydia Durnovo, and that early medieval frescoes of Armenia are executed in two different styles. Kotandjyan distinguishes two groups of paintings according to quality of their colors. On one hand there are churches of Talin, Lmbat, Karmavor and Zoravar which paintings were identified by Kotandjyan as a national Armenian style with more Syro-Palestinian features. On the other

³⁴ Thierry 1973, pp. 379–409.

³⁵ Thierry 1973, pp. 409–421.

³⁶ Kotandjyan 2017, p. 36.

³⁷ On Kotandjyan see Gayfedian 2019.

³⁸ Kotandjyan 2017.

³⁹ Kotandjyan, *Cvjet v rannestrednovekovom...*, 1978.

hand, frescoes in the cathedral of Aruch were classified as more Hellenistic. The church of Kosh stands in between. But Armenian painting combines the two styles in a unique way. If the Armenian monumental painting is Hellenistic, it is always more oriental than the art of Byzantium and if it is Oriental, it is always more western than the art of Orient.⁴⁰

Kotandjyan also dates the frescoes using an analysis of the plaster composition and pigments. He concludes that the frescoes are contemporary with the architecture, because the sand used for plaster in the post-Arab period is much finer.⁴¹ Kotandjyan argued that the churches were fully painted in their interior and the fact that today only apses stayed painted is not a question of taste but a matter of preservation. Most importantly, Kotandjyan changes the narrative about the poor technical quality of Armenian fresco painting. The poor quality of Armenian frescoes was considered to be the reason for such a bad state of their preservation. It was Lydia Durnovo who claimed that the layer of plaster in Armenian frescoes was too thin and thus it was not able to sustain earthquakes.⁴² This assumption was accepted until very recently as a matter of fact. Kotandjyan, on the other hand, argues there is an exceptional technical quality of the paintings, thanks to which, many well-preserved fragments survived countless earthquakes and other disasters to the current day.⁴³

Since the 70s, researchers started to pay more attention also to the iconography of the preserved scenes. Kotandjyan agrees with the interpretation of Lydia Durnovo, and identifies all surviving apsidal compositions as a certain form of the Ascension in a triumphal vision executed in few different versions. Sometimes the Christ was standing performing the so-called *Traditio legis*, sometimes he was enthroned and flanked by seraphs, and in case of the Talin cathedral, the figure of Christ was replaced by *Hetoimasia*.⁴⁴ Regardless, Kotandjyan also points out that the monuments executed in a more western style have more Byzantine iconography, while the iconography of eastern styled frescoes is closer to Syro-Palestinian style.

This interpretation was also supported by Armenian scholar Seyranush Manukyan in her paper from 1978, on a complex system of murals in Armenian churches.⁴⁵ However,

⁴⁰ Kotandjyan, *Chudožestvennij jazyk...*, 1978.

⁴¹ Kotandjyan 1988, p. 368.

⁴² Durnovo 1957, pp. 10–11.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 340.

⁴⁴ Kotandjyan 2007, p. 138; Kotandjyan 2017.

⁴⁵ Manukyan 1978.

Manukyan also adds that in every scene the figure of Christ refers to a prophetic vision, and thus combines the Old and the New Testament into one cohesive program in a way typical for miniature painting. Manukyan also posits that the remaining fragments of frescoes allow us to, at least partially, reconstruct the program of seventh-century Armenian churches based on church hierarchy.⁴⁶

The same aspects were also highlighted by soviet art historian Vasilij Grigorievich Putsko (*1941) in his article on iconography of the seventh-century Armenian altar painting.⁴⁷ Putsko also identified the allusion to a prophetic vision especially in the church of Lmbat, where a depiction of cherubs fully corresponds with the writing of the prophet. Though, in the case of the Talin cathedral, Putsko does not agree with the previous interpretations. The Ascension is the completion of Christ's mission on Earth, and while Christ returned to his father, his Word stayed with us. In Talin, however, the apsidal composition was identified as the Ascension scheme in which Christ is replaced by a book of the Gospel, which is, according to Putsko, illogical.⁴⁸

2.4 The scholarship of the new millennium

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Armenia found itself in a very problematic situation. A war with Azerbaijan regarding the territory of Artsakh threw the state into a deep economic crisis and made the country dependent on Russia.⁴⁹ Under such conditions, studies of Armenian painting were cast aside; and only in recent years was the field able to rise up from the ashes while new studies started to be published. The new age of Armenian fresco painting starts around 2013. In that year, Christina Maranci (*1968) —at that time an art history professor at Tufts university in Massachusetts—undertook her first expedition to Mren. The cathedral of Mren was not studied since the Thierry's in the 1970s, because of this, Maranci was able to explore the cathedral and its frescoes with fresh eyes, as a contemporary art historian. With the help of digital photography, the scholar was able to complete some missing parts of the apsidal fresco of Mren, and discovered new inscriptions, including the inscription running along the triumphal arch. Maranci published her findings

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 174.

⁴⁷ Putsko 1980.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 151.

⁴⁹ See Panossian 2006.

in two articles and a monograph called *Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia*.⁵⁰ The scholar discovered that the Christ in the apse of Mren originally had his right hand raised in the gesture of benediction in the same way as the Christs from the churches of Aruch and Cromi in Georgia. Maranci thus, for the very first time, proposes to read the combination of the text and the image as an expression of the doctrinal issues in the seventh-century Armenia.⁵¹ The monograph was a sensation in an art historical and armenological community perspective, and it boosted a new wave of interest in Armenian early medieval painting.

One of the places effected by the discoveries of Christina Maranci is the Center for Early Medieval Studies in Brno. Since 2015, the research center run by Ivan Foletti is regularly returning to Armenia and Georgia to study its medieval monuments. The trips resulted in numerous scholarly outcomes, two of which were concerned with seventh century Armenian fresco in the church of Talin.⁵² Firstly, in my bachelor's thesis I tried to follow the path of Maranci and interpreted the fresco in Talin in the context of time and place of its creation. I proposed to read the fresco as an allusion to dogmatic disputes in the seventh-century Armenia, more concretely as a reference to the Council of Ephesus (431).⁵³ Ivan Foletti further develops this hypothesis and points out, that such an image can refer to an installation present in most of the Early Christian ecumenical councils, among them also the Council of Chalcedon (451), and interprets it rather as an image of orthodoxy.⁵⁴ This discussion opened the way for this master's thesis, and hopefully, also for further research on Armenian seventh-century frescoes.

The rise of this new trend is especially visible in Armenia. Since 2013, two articles and two new monographs were published by Armenian scholars concerned specifically with the monumental painting of the seventh century. The first scholar contributing to this revival is Zaruhi Hakobyan, a professor at Yerevan State University in Armenia. In 2016 she produced two articles on this topic. One of these articles' aims is to place the monumental

⁵⁰ Maranci 2013; Maranci 2014/2015; Maranci 2015.

⁵¹ Maranci 2015, p. 90.

⁵² Among the outcomes of the center see *Convivium*, supplementum 2016; Hudcovicová 2018; Baraničová 2020; Lejosne 2020.

⁵³ Hermanová 2020, pp. 36–40.

⁵⁴ Foletti 2021.

painting of the early medieval Armenia into the context of Eastern Christian art.⁵⁵ In the article, Hakobyan offers an updated synthesis of all discovered frescoes and mosaics from that period, briefly describing their state of preservation and iconography. Hakobyan also recognizes two styles of Armenian painting. She explains the dichotomy as a matter of taste, since it is logical that Armenian princes adopted the style of their Byzantine rulers. However, the overall style and iconography belongs, according to Hakobyan, to the Eastern Christian tradition.⁵⁶ Concerning the question of Chalcedonism, Hakobyan acknowledges that the peak of Armenian painting production always occurred during times of fertile cultural interactions with Byzantium. During such periods Armenian-Chalcedonian communities rose. However, to ascribe the tradition to paint churches only to Chalcedonians, would be incorrect.⁵⁷ In the second article, Hakobyan focuses on the iconography of the so-called *Traditio legis*, in Armenian art.⁵⁸ The scholar identifies five different variants of *Traditio legis* located on the frescoes in Mren and Aruch, exterior relief decorations in Odzun, a mosaic in Cromi, and the ivory cover of the Echmiadzin gospel. Hakobyan identifies the Armenian version of *Traditio legis* as one step in the development of the *Traditio legis* iconography, which was lost in Byzantine art due to the Iconoclasm but stayed preserved in the art of former Eastern Byzantine provinces.⁵⁹

Shortly thereafter, first monograph was published since 1978, which was focused exclusively on the early medieval Armenian monumental painting. It was called *Монументальная живопись в раннесредневековой Армении (IV-VII века)* [Monumental painting in early medieval Armenia (4th-7th centuries)].⁶⁰ Irina Drampyan collected and harmonized the work of Nikolay Kotandjyan, and published it together with an extensive historiographical and historical introduction. The last part of the book is composed of short essays summarizing the knowledge on frescoes in Ciceravank, Lmbatavank, Kosh, Talin, Aruch and Zoravar. The aim of the book is to finally set the record straight, and to answer the questions which accompanied the studies of Armenian painting since the very beginning.

⁵⁵ Hakobyan, *Монументальная живопись...*, 2016.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

⁵⁸ Hakobyan, *Даяние закона в Армянской...*, 2016.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 108–110.

⁶⁰ Kotandjyan 2017.

First, the authors decided to resolve the question of whether Armenian painting has a Chalcedonian origin or not. The authors explain the genesis of the idea and make it very clear that there is no such thing as Chalcedonian Armenian painting. They state that the baseless assumptions of Marr were taken over by Georgian researchers, such as Shalva Amiranashvili (1899–1975), who attributed the originality of Armenian painting to that of the Georgian workshops. From there, the idea transferred to Nicole Thierry and many others.⁶¹ Also, the presupposition that the fresco technique of the Armenian masters was not good enough to withstand an earthquake, is considered false.⁶² According to authors, the only reason why so many Armenian churches seem to bear no trace of frescoes, is the repeatedly occurring iconoclasm of invaders, which still continues in the current day. This vandalism is especially present in modern-day Turkey and Azerbaijan.⁶³ Concerning the question of foreign “influences,” authors hold a very nationalistic position. They argue that Armenia between the fifth and the seventh centuries was the keeper of synthesis between Christian and Hellenistic culture. Armenians learned a lot from the Greeks, but only in terms of their own national artistic interests. They took the Hellenistic style and transformed it into an Armenian national style.⁶⁴ Despite the clear, nationalistic phrasing, nowadays, the book is considered the most important monograph on this topic.

The last and most recent monograph was published in 2019 by two restorers – Ara Zarian, an architect restorer, and Christine Lamoureux, a fresco restorer. Zarian and Lamoureux visited Armenia in 2010 and seeing the very bad state of the precious Early Medieval frescoes, they decided to act immediately. Since 2012, the two restorers regularly returned to Armenia to clean and conserve the frescoes at their own expense. Between 2014 and 2017 they completely restored the fresco in Lmbatavank. The results impressed the officials in the Artsakh region so much, that they invited the two restorers to revive the thirteenth century fresco in Dadivank as well; nevertheless, Zarian and Lamoureux were able to, at least partially, clean and restore churches in Karmavor, Mastara, Artik, Talin, Garnahovit, Yeghvard, Aragatz, Kosh, and Nor Kyanq.⁶⁵ Their activities continue even today, since the restorers were spending the summer in 2022 in Artik. The monograph called

⁶¹ Kotandjyan 2017, pp. 35–37.

⁶² *Ibidem* p. 70.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, pp. 23–24.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

⁶⁵ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 26.

“The restoration of wall paintings in several Armenian churches of first Christian ages,”⁶⁶ documents every step of their work in great detail, summarizes all of their findings, and even outlines some hypothesis for further research. The introduction written by Patrick Donabedian sums up the immense contribution of Zarian and Lamoureux’s work for studies of Armenian art.

During the cleaning, the restorers discovered many new fresco fragments and inscriptions. In Karmavor they revealed an entirely new apsidal composition of Deisis; and in Mastara, a painting of two horse riders and depictions of saints became groundbreaking news. One of the most impressive discoveries is the fact that although the entire surface of the churches’ interiors were plastered, not all of them were painted. Authors assume that many of the seventh-century churches were mainly white or solid colored, except for maybe the church of Mastara, which might have been fully painted.⁶⁷ The two restorers also did a chemical analysis of the frescoes plaster and pigments. They were able to learn about the exact technique of the seventh-century plaster and painting application and discovered very interesting signs painted on the walls of churches before the application of plaster. The analysis of the plaster finally confirmed Kotandjyan’s observation about the exceptional technical quality of Armenian frescoes, as well as the assumption that most of the fifth to the seventh century Armenian churches were originally painted.⁶⁸ The work of Zarian and Lamoureux thus opened up entirely new horizons for everyone studying early medieval Armenian painting.

2.5 Conclusion

Careful reading of the bibliography revealed that early medieval Armenian frescoes are still the least studied branch of Armenian art history. The first period was characterized by the false notion about iconoclasm of the Armenian Church, which slowed down the scholarly impetus. Later, a strongly positivist approach of Soviet research limited the possible methodological development of the field. Lastly, the national-oriented scholarship of post-Soviet period led to an autoreferential discourse, forgetting the transcultural context of the Late Antique Armenia. Meanwhile, the contemporary research is still asking itself the

⁶⁶ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 24–28.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 38–42.

same questions, often determinate by an implicit spiral of ideologies and inherited opinions. This situation should be also understood as a reaction to ongoing cultural genocide of Armenian monuments on the territory of Eastern Turkey, Azerbaijan and Artsakh.

It seems like the most basic question – Is there such a thing as Armenian monumental painting? – was asked again and again since the beginning of the twentieth century, and it turned out to be the most urgent one even today. Since Marrs' expedition in Ani, the scholarship was determinate by the idea that if there is Armenian monumental painting, it can be assigned only to confessors of the dogma of Chalcedon. Ignoring, or only partially recognizing the scholarship of Sirarpe der Nersessian, the scholars kept taking over this assumption, trying to fit it into new theories. Only in recent years was the claim convincingly dismissed by Irina Drampyan and Nikolay Kotandjyan and all the monumental painting up to the end of the seventh century was proclaimed Armenian, meaning as made by and for confessors of the Armenian Church. But even this claim cannot be considered final, because, as I will try to prove in following chapters, there clearly were Armenian nobles during the seventh century belonging to the Chalcedonian spheres, who happened to be donors of major seventh-century cathedrals.

Another issue, which pops out repeatedly in the scholarship on early medieval Armenian painting, is the stylistic and iconographical dichotomy of the frescoes. It was noted already by Durnovo and then highlighted by Kotandjyan that frescoes in seventh-century Armenian churches are executed in two different styles and iconographies – one being more Oriental, meaning Syro-Palestinian, and the second more Hellenistic, meaning Byzantine-like. The duality was explained by Hakobyan as a result of individual taste of concrete donors. But concerning the tangled political situation of the seventh-century Armenia, the solution is probably much more complex.

The positivism of previous research, although preventing the field from asking new questions, proved to be very useful in terms of dating. First Kotandjyan and now also Zarian and Lamoureux analyzed the plaster and pigments composition and concluded that the frescoes in Lmbat were certainly made in the seventh century. The scholars assume the same dating for Talin, Aruch, Karmavor, Mastara and Kosh. Some of those churches were dated based on analysis of the plaster, since the sand used for plaster in post-Arab period is much finer than the one used in the seventh century. But even such conclusion is not sufficient.

Later in the text I will try to demonstrate how big of a difference it would be, if the fresco would be executed in the 40s or 80s of the seventh century, or rather at the beginning of the eight century. On the other hand, some of the churches were dated only based on Durnovo's stylistic analysis and never re-considered.

Still today, after one hundred years of research new fragments of frescoes are being discovered, opening new possibilities for their interpretation. Except for the church of Mren studied by Maranci and the cathedral of Talin examined by Hermanová and Foletti, none of the precious seventh century frescoes was never interpreted with regards to their architecture. I am convinced that all the questions mentioned before deserve more attention, but it is also important to move on and try to look at the paintings as an integral part of the architecture, which had its function, a donor and a specific audience. In the following chapters, I will try to contribute to the research by looking at the same material from the new perspective.

3. FRESCOES AND THEIR CHURCHES

There are more than thirty Southern Caucasian churches from the early medieval period in which monumental painting was attested. In most cases, we only have some fragments of plaster with pigments preserved (Artik, Zoravar, Sisian). In some cases, only a few tesserae or a small piece of mosaic was found by archeologists (Dvin, Echmiadzin, Zvartnots),⁶⁹ and some of the paintings are only documented in writing (Khor Virap, Bagaran, Manazkert, Tekor).⁷⁰ Only a few of the churches preserved readable fragments of frescoes which were documented, cleaned, and studied. Most important ones, concerning the seventh-century fresco painting, are the few preserved apsidal compositions and other bigger fragments. Many of them are barely visible today. We are only able to study them thanks to tireless work of three generations of researchers and restorers.

Durnovo documented most of the known seventh-century frescoes in the 1940s and 50s. She was able to study frescoes from Lmbat, Talin, Aruch, Kosh, Ciranavor, Karmravor, Artik, Zoravar and Sisian.⁷¹ In the 60s, an apsidal composition from the church of Mren was added to the catalogue by Thierry's.⁷² In the 70s, Kotandjyan cleaned and restored some of the frescoes studied before by Durnovo. The intervention revealed new fragments which allowed Kotandjyan to reevaluate some of Durnovo's iconographical conclusions.⁷³ In the 80s, Putsko reexamined the fresco in Karmravor and discovered a composition of Christ in Glory in the apse.⁷⁴ Finally, the work in progress of Lamoureux and Zarian, which started after 2010, continues to provide new discoveries. Some of the most recent news is the freshly discovered fresco in Mastara, and a composition of Deisis in Karmravor.

This thesis aims to reexamine paintings which are preserved and well-documented enough to be studied from an art historical perspective. This chapter will introduce the current state of preservation and architectural context of frescoes from Talin, Lmbat, Karmravor, Kosh, Mastara, Aruch and Mren. The church of Cromi in neighboring Georgia

⁶⁹ Pieces of mosaic and tesserae were found during archeological excavations in Dvin, Echmiadzin cathedral and Zvartnots. More on that in Hakobyan 2016, p. 137; Kotandyjan 2017, p. 57.

⁷⁰ Hakobyan 2016, pp. 136–138.

⁷¹ Durnovo 1957, pp. 8–13; Durnovo 1979, pp. 140–144.

⁷² Thierry, Thierry 1971.

⁷³ Kotandjyan 1988, pp. 342–343.

⁷⁴ Putsko 1982.

will be added to the catalogue as well, due to identical iconographical traits shared with Aruch and Mren.

3.1 Talin cathedral

Architectural context

The cathedral of Talin is located on an outskirts of the city of Talin in the Aragatsotn region. It is situated in the middle of a medieval cemetery and accompanied by a seventh-century cross planed domed church of Saint Mary, just 150m to the south-east. The church bears a dedicatory inscription of Nerseh Kamsarakan, who was identified as Nerseh II, appointed by the Byzantine emperor Justinian II as the prince of Armenia between 689-692.⁷⁵ A church with a cross shaped plan, a dome, and in a middle of a cemetery, was assigned by Cuneo and Donabedian to have a kind of funerary function of sorts, and it is probable that it served as a funerary chapel for the Kamsarakan family.⁷⁶ North of the cathedral, sits a one nave basilica with a crypt dated between the fifth and sixth centuries, and it is visible only in the form of a ground plan. The architecture strikingly resembles Early Christian Armenian martyria.⁷⁷ On the site there are a number of early medieval stelae dated between the fourth and the seventh century, as well as some other unidentified ruins.⁷⁸ One of the oblong-shaped ruins was probably a chapel, since it was depicted still standing on a mid-nineteenth-century graphic published in a book by Hovhannes Shakhhatuniants.⁷⁹

The cathedral itself is a magnificent ruin (ca 18 x 34 m), which consists of a three-nave basilica with three protruding apses, and a dome on squinches supported by four pillars. The apsidal space is slightly elevated and flanked by two chapels. It is a spacious and light building with five entrances sheltered by porticoes, and has walls pierced by many windows. The exterior of the building is decorated by blind arcades, cornices, and window bands with

⁷⁵ The inscription says: +ԵՄ ՆԵՐՍԵՀ ԿԱՄՏԱՐԱԿԱՆ ԿԱՍՏՐԻԿ ԾԻՂԱԿԱՅ ԵՒ ԱՇԱՐՈՒՆԱՅ ՏԵՐ ԾԻ/ ՆԵՑԻ ՁԵԿԵՂԵՑԻՍ ՅԱՆՈՒՆ ՍՐԲ[Ո]Յ Ա(ՍՏՈՒԱ)ԾԱԾՆԻՆ Ի ԲԱՐԵԽԱԲՍՈՒ/ ԹԻՆ ԻՆՁ ԵՒ ԾՈՒՇԱՆՍՅ ԱՍՈՒՄՆՈՅ ԻՄՈՅ ԵՒ/ ՀՐԱՀԱՏԱՅ ՈՐԴԻՈՅ ՄԵՐՈՅ+ „*I Nerseh apohypat patrik, lord of Shirak and Arsharunik, built this church in the name of the Holy Mother of God for the intercession of me and Shushan my wife and Hrahat our son*“, in Greenwood 2004, p. 86.

⁷⁶ Cuneo 1988, p. 29; Donabédian 2008, p. 130; Hermanová 2020, pp. 52–55.

⁷⁷ The crypt resembles crypts in churches of St Hripsime and St Gayane. However, the similarity with Saint Etienne in Nakhjavan and of Saint Thadee in Karenis is also striking. Both churches are dated by Donabédian into the 7th century. In Donabedian 2008, pp. 203-205.

⁷⁸ More on the one nave church in Hermanová 2020, pp. 56–57.

⁷⁹ Shakhhatuniants 1842, pp. 238–239.

rich and elegant sculptural decoration. The western façade is decorated by two monumental niches with inserted columns crowned by crosses. The entire structure is then placed on a three stepped stylobate. Due to its architectural composition and sculptural decoration, as well as the presupposition that the cathedral—same as the church of Saint Mary—was built by the prince of Armenia Nerseh Kamsarakan, the structure was dated to the last quarter of the seventh century.⁸⁰ The ground plan, as well as the sculptural decoration of Talin, is almost identical with the seventh-century version of the cathedral of Dvin, which functioned as the seat of catholicos in the former capitol of Armenian kingdom.⁸¹ Considering the luxurious architecture, the number of funerary monuments, graves and presence of a basilica with a crypt, as well as position of the cathedral on a wealthy trade route, it is possible to interpret the building as an important Late Antique martyrium.⁸²

Monumental painting of Talin

Fragments of plaster are to be found all over the church's interior, but not all of them bear traces of pigment. The Talin cathedral was probably one of those churches which although it was entirely plastered, was not entirely painted. Some areas, such as the dome or the vault, probably remained white or solid colored.⁸³ The only readable fragments of fresco are preserved in the eastern part of the church. In the conch, there is an image of an open book on a throne placed in a huge mandorla, and it is filled in and surrounded by stars. The throne is flanked by two angelic creatures whose wings are covered with eyes.⁸⁴ On the intrados of the apse there is a row of eleven medallions. Ten of them were probably filled with busts of saints or prophets while the one in the middle contains an equilateral cross. The frieze with medallions on the outer-side is accompanied by a garland of colorful berries growing from two vessels and is placed on both sides of the intrados.

The space under the conch is filled with another band of ten medallions. There is no way to find out what could have been depicted inside of them, but the space between the medallions was filled with various ornaments.⁸⁵ The medallions are separated from a chancel

⁸⁰ Donabédian 2008, p. 118; Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 154.

⁸¹ Kazaryan 2005.

⁸² Hermanová 2020, pp. 62–68.

⁸³ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, pp. 24–28.

⁸⁴ Only one creature is visible. Kotandjyan assumed that the composition was symmetrical, and therefore, placed the creature on both sides of the throne when creating a hypothetical reconstruction.

⁸⁵ Durnovo 1957, pp. 8–9; Kotandjyan 2017, p. 97.

by a decorative band filled with an ornament of encircled flowers. Under the band, on the level of the three apsidal windows, there is a group of twelve standing figures holding books. These figures are the twelve apostles distributed between windows in groups of four, two, two, and four. Strzygowski also noted some illegible inscription above the figures, but this detail was not noticed by Durnovo nor by Kotandjyan.⁸⁶ The apse is enclosed by two pilasters on either side, on which two horse riders were painted.⁸⁷

The Talin cathedral preserved a unique example of a narrative scene depicted on a southern wall of the apse. The scene of Christ entering Jerusalem was well visible in the 50s, but today, only faded traces of some preliminary drawing can be spotted there.⁸⁸ Fragments of another narrative scene is still preserved on an eastern wall of the northern apse. One can recognize two heads, one of them probably the Virgin Mary, and the other has an ornamental frame. Unfortunately, the fragment is too small to recognize the iconography. Another fragment is located above the entrance to the southern chapel. It depicts three standing saints enclosed in a red ornamental frame. They are accompanied by a painted inscription of Moses which refers to the church as *ԿԱԹՈՂՈՒԿԵ* (cathedral). This inscription thus attests to the episcopal function of the church. It says:

I Movses insignificant and unworthy Ekekhetsapan of this holy church ordered to paint this holy cathedral for the sake of intercession for me and for my parents.⁸⁹

Frescoes in the Talin cathedral were studied by Durnovo and Kotandjyan. Based on their documentation, the fresco was recently cleaned and restored by Zarian and Lamoureux. During their work, the restorers found out that the lower part of the fresco contained one more element: wheels on a fiery background. Very small fragments of it were painted in the travel notebooks of Lydia Durnovo, but it was never mentioned in any of her writing.⁹⁰ The same iconographical detail can be found in Lmbat. All the above-described fragments are nicely visible and conserved to this day.

⁸⁶ Strzygowski 1918, p. 298.

⁸⁷ Durnovo 1957, pp. 8–9.

⁸⁸ A black and white photograph of the scene was published in Kotandjyan 2017. On the photograph the donkey is still nicely visible.

⁸⁹ ԵՍ ՍՈՎՍ[ԷՍ ՆՎ]/ ԱՍՏ ԷԻ ԱՆԱՐԺԱ[Ն]/ ԵԿԵՂԵՑԱՊԱ[Ն]/ ԱՐԵՈՑ ԵԿԵՂԵՑ-/ [Ո]ՑՍ ԵՏՈՒ ԿԵՆ- / ՂԱՆԱՖՐԷԼ Ձ-/ ՍՈՒՐԲ ԿԱԹՈՂ[Ի]/ ԿԵՍ ԲԱՐ[Է]Խ[ԱԻ]/ ՍՈՒԹ[Ի]Ի[Ն] ԻՆՁ ԵԻ/ [Ծ]Ն[ՈՂԱՑ ԻՍՈՑ] “Я Мовсес ничтожный и недостойный екехецапан сей святой церкви велел расписать этот святой собор (католике) ради заступничества за меня и за моих родителей”, published in Kazaryan 2012, p. 146. Translated from Russian into English by V. Džugan Hermanová.

⁹⁰ Lamoureux, Zarian 2019, p. 79.

Stylistically, both Durnovo and Kotandjyan classified the Talin painting among monuments with the Oriental style, meaning that the painting lacks spatial modeling, the color palette contains mostly warm colors, contours are highlighted, and the overall character of the painting can be described as graphic and flat. In this respect, the painting in Talin is very similar to painting in Lmbat. Kotandjyan also observed that the conch is executed in a different style than the Entry into Jerusalem. He thinks it was done by a different master.⁹¹

3.2 Lmbat or the St Stephen church of Lmbatavank

Architectural context

The church of Lmbat is located near the city of Artik in the Shirak region. It is situated among ruins of the Lmbatavank monastery, and its inscriptions reveal a dedication to St Stephen.⁹² Lmbat is quite mysterious in terms of its dating. The oldest inscription carved into its walls comes from the first half of the eleventh century. It informs about a certain Karapet who brought water to the monastery, which from that point forward was called St Stephen of Sarnaghbyur (*Սարնաղբյուր* – meaning a fresh source of water).⁹³ The church has been dated to the seventh century, due to its architectural elements and overall composition.⁹⁴ While Donabedin and Plontke-Lüning argue that the dating is from the first half of the seventh century, Kazaryan dates it into the second half or even last quarter of the seventh century.⁹⁵ The discussion revolves around the form of decorative cornices and window bands. Kazaryan also argues that masons' marks match other monuments dated into the last quarter of the seventh century.

During the Middle Ages, Lmbatavank passed from Kamsarakan to the Pahlavouni family, and then to the Seljuks. It was brought back from the Seljuks by a certain Father Barsegh in 1191. Then, in the fourteenth century the monastery passed to the Zakarians along with the entire Shirak province. One can imagine quite a wealthy monastery, since various inscriptions mention specific donations from villages to the church, such as a wine press or

⁹¹ Durnovo 1979, p. 142; Kotandjyan 1988, p. 343; Kotandjyan 2017, p. 99.

⁹² Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 580; Lamoureux, Zarian 2019, p. 68.

⁹³ Yeghiazaryan 1960, pp. 55–57.

⁹⁴ Stryzowski 1918, pp. 497–498; Cuneo 1988, pp. 113.

⁹⁵ Plontke-Lüning cat. 2007, p. 184; Donabedian 2008, p. 139; Kayarzan vol. III 2012, p. 584.

fruit gardens.⁹⁶ Today, the church stands in solitude on a wide hillside, accompanied by only a few tombstones. There were no archeological excavations, only a cleaning of the soil around the monument up to 1.2 meters deep during the restoration of the church in the 1950s.⁹⁷

The church is built on a cruciform plan with a tall dome in the center. The western arm of the cross is a bit elongated, while all three remaining arms contain an apse. In the Eastern apse there is an elevated bema. The dome is created by a transition from a square to an octahedral drum using four large squinches in corners of the square and eight smaller squinches above them. It was rebuilt during the thirteenth century as attested by an inscription near the window on a western façade.⁹⁸ Originally, the church had six windows; four in a drum, and two in the southern and western walls. The eastern and western windows of the drum are much smaller, probably for better visibility of the fresco.⁹⁹ A window piercing the eastern apse is of a later date, it was surely placed there after the creation of the fresco.¹⁰⁰ There are decorative bands above all the original windows, and a decorative cornice running under the roof along a square part of the dome. The church is quite small (interior dimensions are ca 7.5 x 6.5 m). Thus, it is appropriate to consider that it might have been adjusted to a bigger hall. In photos from the beginning of the twentieth century, one can see that the western façade is damaged up to the level of the window. However, the height would be sufficient for an adjusted hall. The southern part of the western façade contains a small chapel.

Monumental painting of Lmbat

The fresco in Lmbat, was from the very beginning, the best-preserved early medieval monumental painting on the territory of Soviet Armenia. The entire composition in the lower part of a conch, and two horse riders on side walls flanking the apse were well visible. That is why it has been mentioned in every writing, regarding Armenian monumental painting. Lmbat was first photographed by Strzygowski, but it was poorly visible.¹⁰¹ Next, it was

⁹⁶ Lamoureux, Zarian 2019, p. 68.

⁹⁷ Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 581.

⁹⁸ Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 580.

⁹⁹ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 70.

¹⁰⁰ Kotandjyan 2017, p. 84; Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 71.

¹⁰¹ Strzygowski vol. II 1918, p. 498.

studied by Durnovo, who recreated the fresco on a life-size panel painting for the National Gallery of Armenia. She identified the image in the conch as the Christ in Glory, sitting on a jeweled throne with his feet placed on a jeweled pedestal. The Christ is enclosed in a mandorla of rainbow colors and placed on a fiery background. The throne is flanked by two tetramorphs on fiery wheels, which have four faces and wings seeded with eyes. On both sides of the edge of the conch are two seraphs depicted with six green wings, and one more pair of seraphs are seen on the pilasters flanking the apse. The pilaster capitals are painted with lotus-shaped palmettes. The two horse riders are the two holy martyrs – St Sargis and St George – holding a staff with a cross at the top. Durnovo dated the fresco to the beginning of the seventh century, based on a comparison between the tetramorph's faces, and the faces of the angels on the mosaic of the Dormition church in Nicea.¹⁰²

Durnovo identified the iconography as the Ascension scene combined with the Vision of the prophet Ezekiel, assuming that there used to be apostles depicted in a chancel. Kotandjyan cleaned and restored the fresco in the 70s, and he found out that the chancel was not painted after all. Kotandjyan could not find any traces of painted plaster in this area.¹⁰³ Later, Zarian and Lamoureux proved that even the white plaster in the chancel and the painted one in the conch are of the same quality, and thus, must have been made simultaneously.¹⁰⁴ Der Nersessian, on the other hand, interpreted the scene in the Lmbat conch as a Theophanic vision, inspired by the Old Testament texts typical in Palestine and Egypt.¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, Kotandjyan pointed out that not only the iconography, but also the painting style is based on principles of Eastern Christian art. Lastly, the spatial modeling is flat, and the colors are applied without shades and finished with thick contours.¹⁰⁶

What came next, was a restoration made by Zarian and Lamoureux between 2013 and 2017. They fully removed previous restorations (probably made by Kotandjyan) because of their poor quality. After that, they cleaned, conserved, and restored the entire surface of the interior walls. Evidently, the plaster in the northern and southern apses were scraped off. Nevertheless, the top part of both conches were painted in red and white directly on the surface of the stone. Additionally, some red ornaments were painted on the white plaster or

¹⁰² Durnovo 1957, pp. 8–9; Durnovo 1979, p. 140.

¹⁰³ Kotandjyan 2017, p. 84.

¹⁰⁴ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 77.

¹⁰⁵ Der Nersessian 1964.

¹⁰⁶ Kotandjyan 1988, p. 341.

directly on the stone and are painted in the squinches as well. The restorers discovered new fragments of painting which allow them to identify the two horse riders as St Theodore on a black horse, and St George on a red horse. St George is identified by a painted inscription, and in the corner above him there is a hand of God stretching towards him. Both martyrs are enclosed in a red frame.¹⁰⁷ The restorers also rediscovered a painted inscription above the image of St Theodore. It is a thirteenth century dedicatory inscription which was written over an already existing fresco in a way which did not respect its special arrangement. The nature of the dedication is impossible to deduce, but the date is clear – 1242.¹⁰⁸

Concerning the technique, the restorers found out that a thin layer of plaster was applied directly to the stone surface. This technique was, however, not a weakness of Armenian frescoes as Durnovo assumed, but rather a strength. The tufa stone does not absorb water and the plaster stayed wet for longer time. Armenian masters thus, had to adjust the painting technique to the material, and the fresco is executed in a mixed style – *affresco* made on a principle of water-painting. The painting consists of two layers of paint, with the first being a very watery layer spread over the wet plaster. This creates an impression of watercolors. Moreover, some parts of the painting such as the eyes of the tetramorphs or jewels of the throne, were painted by a metallic color in which silver powder was added. The eyes then reflected light and created an illusion of movement.¹⁰⁹

3.3 *Karmravor or the Astvatsatsin church in Ashtarak*

Architectural context

The church is located on a slope of a mountain in the city of Ashtarak in the Aragatsotn region. The city itself has a rich history, as it was mentioned by fifth century historians. However, there is no source which would help to precisely date the church. There is an extensive dedicatory inscription encircling the church walls which, unfortunately, does

¹⁰⁷ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 78.

¹⁰⁸ The inscription says: ...ՅԱԼՆԱ ՋԻՄ Ջ... / ...ՍՔ ԼՄԲԱՏ Ի ՏԲ ՍՏ[ԵՓԱՆ / ՈՍ] ԲՈՍ ԵՒ ՈՐ ՍՅ[Ս]...
 ...Կ ԿԱ Ի ՍԲ ԵՐՐՈՐԴՈՒ[ԹԻԻՆ] / ...Ի ՄԱՐՄԱՐՍ ՄԱՍ ՆՈՐ ... / ...ՇԱՀԱՆ[ՇԱՀ] ...ՄԵՂՍ... Է ՈՐ
 ... / ...ԳԱԿ...Ս ՈՂՍ (1242) ԹՈՒԿԿԱՆԻ / [ԵՍ ՀԱՅՐ] ՅԱԿՈՎԲՈՍ, ՈՐ ԷՏՈՒ ՅԱՅՍ ՅԱԳԻ ... / ...ԱԶ...
 / ...ՈՐԱ Ա... / ԳԻՍԻՍ ԱՍ ՈԱ... / ...ԵՒ ՎԵՐԱԿԱՅՈՒ ԼԻՆԻ ԱՅՍ ԷԿԵ[ՂԵ]ՑՈՅՍ ԵՒ ԷԹԷ ՈՔ / ...ՍՍՐ
 ՍԱ... ԱՍՑ...ԵՆ... ԲԱՉԳ... in Matevosyan 2017, p. 78. It was copied already by Durnovo, but never mentioned in literature.

¹⁰⁹ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 110.

not contain a date. The inscription mentions the names of donors –priests Gregory, Manas and their sons – as well as Davit, the writer of the inscription.¹¹⁰ The form and phrasing of the inscription coalesces with the seventh century, though, the church was eventually dated according to its architectural composition and sculptural decorative elements into the seventh century. Kazaryan even specified the date between the 670s and 680s.¹¹¹

Today, the church stands in solitude, accompanied only by a medieval cemetery. Its surroundings were cleaned and flattened out, but up until 1913 it was a part of a monastery complex.¹¹² An inscription from 1292 mentions villagers who allocated funds for a church renovation and the construction of an irrigation canal.¹¹³ The monastery must have been very popular even throughout the nineteenth century, since, at that time a big hall was added to the church. The construction was destroyed in the 1950s during a purification of the site caused by a Soviet restoration.¹¹⁴

The architecture of the church is, in many respects, similar to the church of Lmbat. Both churches have similar dimensions, and almost identical ground plans and elevations. The Karmavor church is a bit smaller since its interior dimensions are only 5.75 x 4.5 m. It is built on a cross shaped plan with a tall dome in the center. It only has one apse in the eastern arm with an elevated bema of a later date. The dome rests on four big squinches which create a shape for an octagonal drum, and above that, eight smaller squinches does the same for a rounded dome. There are four windows in the drum, and three windows in every wall of the church except for the northern wall. The only entrance comes from the west, and it used to be highlighted by a portal. The exterior façade is decorated by beautiful ornamental cornices and window bands. The roof is preserved in original form, and even the tiles imitate the original shape and decoration.¹¹⁵ The exterior walls are carved with crosses

¹¹⁰ ԵՍ ՂԱԲԻԹ, ՄԵՂԱԲ ՈՐՂԻ ԵՐԱՆՈՍԱՅ [...ի...] ԳԵԻՂԱՔԱՂԱՔԷՍ ՅԵՐԻՑՈՒՆԵԱՅ ԳՐԻԳՈՐԻ ԹԱՀ(Ա)ՆԱՑԻ, ԵՒ ՄԱՆԱՍ ԵՒ ՈՐՂԻՔ ՏՈՒԱՔ ՇԻՆԵԼ ՋԵԿ[ԵՂԵՑԻ ՍՈՒՐԲ] ԱՍՏՈՒԱԾԱԾԻՆՍ ՎԱՍՆ ԽԱՂԱՂՈՒԹԵԱՆ ԱՄԵՆԱՑՆ ԱՇԽԱՐՀԻ ԵՒ ՇԻՆՈՒԹԵԱՆ ԱՇՏԱՐԱԿԻ ԵՒ ՊՏՂԱՔԵՐՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՍԱՀՄԱՆԻԴ ԵՒ ՎԱՍՆ ՓՐԿՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՀՈԳԻՈՑ ՄԵՐՈՑ ԿԵՆԴԱՆԵԱՅ ԵՒ ՄԵՌԵԼՑ: ՄՄԱ ՓԱՓԱԳԵՑԱՔ ՍՈՒՐԲ ԼՈՒՍՈՑ ՄՄԱ ԿՈՉԵՑԱՔ ՈՐՂԻ ՎՇԱՅ ԱՆԱՐԺԱՆՈ: In Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 206.

¹¹¹ Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 209.

¹¹² Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 141.

¹¹³ Yaralov 1951, p. 84.

¹¹⁴ The hall was about 15 m long. Its archival photography was published in Cuneo 1988.

¹¹⁵ In 2005, the roof tiles were fully renovated using the form and design of original ones. In Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 207.

and graffiti. Overall, the Karmravor church is among one of the best preserved seventh century Armenian churches to this day.

Monumental painting of Karmravor

In 1974, the interior walls of the church were cleaned, plaster which was applied later on was removed, and fragments of an original painting were revealed.¹¹⁶ Durnovo was only able to spot the feet and the bottoms of garments of some saints.¹¹⁷ Kotandjyan pointed out that there are more fragments, but their colors have been washed away and only preliminary drawings remained.¹¹⁸ However, in the 80s Putsko studied the church, and found out that there is much more yet to be discovered. In the apse, he traced Christ in Glory in a mandorla accompanied on both sides by a cherubim and a seraphim. On the walls of the western arm, Putsko also spotted two horse riders, which he identified as two martyrs with an apotropaic function.

In 2016, Zarian and Lamoureux cleaned and restored the fresco in Karmravor. Their careful work brought to light some groundbreaking discoveries. First, on the wall of the western arm the restorers uncovered St Serge on horseback with a cross-topped lance in his hands, and opposite to him St George with a sword. They are identified by readable inscriptions next to their heads. Next, the restorers moved to the apse where they uncovered an entire composition. In the chancel, a group of five standing figures is depicted to the right and left of the window. According to their garments, they were identified as church fathers, the Three Great Cappadocians: St Basil of Caesarea, St Gregory of Nyssa, and St John Chrysostom or St Gregory of Nazianzus. To the left of the window there is likely a depiction of St Gregory the Illuminator and St Stephen protomartyr.¹¹⁹

In the conch they discovered not only the enthroned figure of Christ among angelic creatures, but also standing figures of the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. Together, they form the scene of Deisis.¹²⁰ The head of Christ is surrounded by a nimbus with a cross, but since his face is damaged, it is impossible to say whether he had a beard or not. There are not two pairs of angelic creatures as assumed by Putsko, but only one pair of four-winged

¹¹⁶ Kazaryan vol. III, p. 207.

¹¹⁷ Durnovo 1979, p. 144.

¹¹⁸ Kotandjyan 1978, pp. 13, 15, 49, 55.

¹¹⁹ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 168.

¹²⁰ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, pp. 147–148.

cherubs flanking the throne of Christ. The space between the figures is filled with stars, and the entire conch is enclosed in bands of different ornaments.

Here, as well as in Lmbat, the restorers discovered red and white painting on the squinches, conchs, and stone joints which was applied directly onto the stone surface. On top of that, the entire surface-area of the walls was covered with a very thin, fine-grain layer of plaster, and selected parts of the plaster were then painted.¹²¹ The paint was applied in two layers. First, contours were painted with black paint onto wet plaster, and then colors were applied. All the figures except for the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist have their faces and hands destroyed by vandals. The two intercessors only escaped this fate because they were hidden under a layer of soot. The painting in the chancel was also vandalized in the lower area by strange, red-colored imprints of hands.¹²² They were eventually removed.

The fresco was dated by Durnovo into the seventh century and this dating was then taken over by Kotandjyan, Putsko and Zarian and Lamoureux.¹²³ However, none of the researchers supports their claims with arguments or other empirical evidence. Since in Georgian art the *Diesis* iconography appears around the tenth century it is possible that the fresco from Karmravor was made much later.¹²⁴

3.4 The church of St Stephen in Kosh

Architectural context

The church is situated on a steep hill near the village Kosh in the Aragatsotn region. There are no documentary sources which would help to date the structure. Researchers used stylistic analysis to date it into the seventh century, but while Donabedian and Grigoryan classified it into the first half of the seventh century, Kazaryan is convinced that the architectural elements are typical for second half of the seventh century.¹²⁵ The church was heavily damaged by an earthquake in the 30s, and restored in its entirety in the 70s. The

¹²¹ Zarian Lamoureux 2019, p. 154.

¹²² A sketch of those imprints is painted in Durnovo's notebook. She probably considered them to be a part of the composition.

¹²³ Durnovo 1979, p. 144.

¹²⁴ Velmans, Alpago Novello 1996, pp. 27–29.

¹²⁵ Grigoryan 1982, p. 48; Donabedian 2008, p. 137; Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 509.

structure was poorly studied and there is practically no information about its history and function.¹²⁶

Typologically, the church (internal dimensions ca 7.6 x 7.8 m), can be classified as one among the small cross-planed domed churches. The western arm of the cross is slightly elongated. The church has one inscribed apse with bema of a later date, and it is flanked by two chapels. The tall dome rests on squinches. The entrance leads from the south and it is highlighted by a portal with triple columns, ornamental frieze on a lintel, and a relief of a cross in a lunette. Its decorative cornices and window bands with rich ornamentation are characteristic for the seventh century. The entire structure is also placed on a three stepped stylobate.

Monumental painting of Kosh

The painting was first described by Durnovo in the 60s. The scholar noted an image of Christ in Glory in the conch and an unusual composition of the Communion of the Apostles in chancel. Christ was depicted in the window arch in two figures and from both sides six apostles were approaching him. Christ holds not a chalice, but a dish with bread and a scroll with text. According to Durnovo, this scene is a peculiar variant of *Traditio legis*.¹²⁷ In Durnovo's notebooks stored in the archives of the National Gallery of Armenia, there is a painting that the scholar made during one of her study trips to Kosh. There is a women figure which was, according to Kotandjyan, part of the scene of the Visitation.¹²⁸

In the 70s, the painting was examined once again by Kotandjyan who also cleaned the remaining fragments of plaster. Unfortunately, the church was left in a ruined condition for more than a decade, and the painting that was seen by Durnovo has mostly disappeared. Foremostly, the Communion of the Apostles was no longer recognizable. Kotanjyan managed to spot traces of the mandorla, wings of tetramorphs, fiery wheels, and ornamental decoration of a throne in the conch. Under the conch, there was an extensive inscription in three lines, which was, according to the scholar, impossible to read even though on the photograph letters were well seen.¹²⁹ He noticed some other standing figures under the

¹²⁶ Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 506.

¹²⁷ Durnovo 1979, p. 142.

¹²⁸ Kotandjyan 2017, p. 90.

¹²⁹ Kotandjyan 2017, p. 90; Images 31, 33, 34, 36 in the same book.

Communion of the Apostles, and in the lower part of the chancel there was an ornamental frieze with half-palmettes.¹³⁰

Kotandjyan also examined the painting from a technical point of view. Using a chemical analysis of used pigments, Kotandjyan found out that the master of Kosh used only a warm and bright color palette. The dominant colors are red, brown, and yellow. The image is composed of big spots of warm colors, with the use of black and white for a decorative effect, with thick lines and pronounced contours. This use of color is, according to Kotandjyan, typical for an Oriental style of painting, and it is possible to see this style in Lmbat as well. But Kosh also contains Hellenistic elements, such as the ornamental frieze in the lower part of the apse. The painting in Kosh combines both styles, using iconographic principles of Oriental painting.¹³¹

In 2016 the painting was cleaned and conserved by Zarian and Lamoureux. Unfortunately, its poor state of preservation did not allow them to reconstruct the original composition.¹³²

3.5 The church of St John the Baptist in Mastara

Architectural context

The church is in Mastara, a village in the Aragatsotn region not far from the city of Talin. Its walls contain extensive epigraphic material which allowed researchers to date the structure into the 40s of the seventh century.¹³³ There are several dedicatory inscriptions on its external walls, which together, give information that a monk, Grigoras Siwni, as well as his nephew, built the church during the pontificate of T'eodoros Gnuni (ca 645) for the atonement of their sins, and as a refuge for Mazdara. The church was, according to those writings, consecrated on the date of Arac' 14 (November 30).¹³⁴ Moreover, there is an

¹³⁰ All this was noted also in Durnovos notebooks.

¹³¹ Kotandjyan 1971, pp. 50–51; Kotandjyan 2017, p. 93.

¹³² Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 216–217.

¹³³ Kazaryan vol. II 2012, pp. 206–207.

¹³⁴ Of the month Arac' [day 14] at the consecration of this holy church and to the memory of bishop . . . ; In the years of Lord T'edoros bishop of Gnunik' this holy house was built to expiate the unworthy Grigoras. Christ God, be compassionate to Grigoras sinner and to me Kep' [. . .] and [-]; I thank God who permitted me Grēgoras Siwni and beloved nephew Grigor to build a house of glory and through this made me . . . [illegible words] bishop of Apahunik'. This is a refuge [apawēn] for Mazdara, a place of prayer for the faithful, a place of repentance for sinners, and a memorial for me and for mine. And you who pray, remember us. . . . In Greenwood 2004, pp. 84–86; Maranci 2017, p. 34.

inscription above the main entrance framed in a closed arch with a khachkar in the middle. Its form and phrasing might suggest a ritual function to the writing.¹³⁵ It says:

Through God's augment of Grigoras the monk this cathedral was built as a refuge for Mazdara. The bride crowned with the cross-signed crown has a bridegroom Christ and as bridal companions the apostles, prophets, and martyrs. Keep Mazdara prosperous and save Grigoras.¹³⁶

With the discovery of monumental painting in the church, the inscription can be read differently. The crown signed with a cross might be the dome of the church decorated by a cross (relief rays) and bridal companions might be the apostles, prophets and martyrs painted on its interior walls. The inscription might thus suggest that the church was painted already during its consecration. The inscription also refers to the church as a *ԿԱԹՈՂՈՍԿԷ* (cathedral) and thus proves its episcopal function. Today the church is consecrated to St John the Baptist but since the inscriptions give no such information, the patrocinium is probably later.

Mastara is among some of the best preserved seventh-century Armenian churches. In the late nineteenth century, the church was slightly reconstructed. The roof was covered with new tiles, the interior of the church was painted yellowish with blue details and the wooden choir was built.¹³⁷ Though, it seems like the dome and exterior walls were mostly preserved in their original forms. Typologically, the church is a great central domed structure with four apses (central square dimensions are ca 12 x 11 m). It has three protruding apses and one inscribed apse, and this compact, very geometric structure is placed on a three-stage stylobate. Exterior walls are richly decorated with cornices and window bands. There are two entrances to the church – western and southern one, both decorated by a portal. An inscription by the priest Artavast from the year 891 is located on a lintel of the southern entrance and attests to the dedication of a new door and a portal.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Maranci 2017, p. 35.

¹³⁶ *Ա(ՄՏՈՒԾՈ)Յ ԱԾՈՂԵԼՈՎ ԳՐԻԳՈՐԱՍԱ(Յ) ՎԱՆԱԿԱՆԻ ՇԻՆԵՑԱԲ ԱՊԱԲԷՆ ՄԱՉԴԱՐԱԲ ԱՅՍ ԿԱԹՈՂՈՍԿԷ ՀԱՐՍ ՆԽԱՉ(ԱՆ)ՇԱՆ ԹԱԳԱԲ ՊՍԱԿԵԱԼ ՈՒՆԻ ՓԵՍԱՅ ՉԶՐԻՍՏՈՍ ՓԵՍԱԲԷՐ ՉԱՌԱՔԵԱԼՍ ՄԱՐԳԱՐԷՍ ՉՎԿԱՅՍ ՍԱ ՊԱՐԵՇԷՆ ՈՒՆԻ ՉՍԱՍԱՐԱ ԵՒ ՓՐԿԷ ՉԳՐ(ԻԳՈՐՈՍ),* in Greenwood 2004, p. 86

¹³⁷ Kazaryan vol. II 2012, p. 201.

¹³⁸ Kazaryan vol. II 2012, p. 200.

The interior is characterized by a rhythm of squinches which flow from the central square into an immense octahedral drum in a three-stage system. The dome is decorated with relief rays that end with concentric circles. The inscribed eastern apse is flanked by two chapels which have entrances that are decorated by lintels carved with crosses and seraphs. The altar space is slightly elevated, and, in the apse, there is also a high bema from a later date.

Monumental painting of Mastara

In 2016, Zarian and Lamoureux discovered fragments of fresco painting under the nineteenth century layer of plaster. After cleaning the plaster, they revealed a figural painting on the southern wall of the church. Near the window, the intervention revealed a big figure on a white horse holding a sword. The restorers identified the figure as St George the Commander. In the southwestern corner of the church, they uncovered two more standing figures with nimbuses enclosed in ornamental frames. One of them is marked with an inscription in Armenian saying, “St Gabriel the Archangel.” Only outlines of the figures are visible together with the curly hair of the archangel. Two more standing figures were uncovered in the eastern curve of the southern apse. Only the lower part of their garments and their feet are visible. One of them has bare feet, and the other one wears closed shoes and an omophorion. They are also enclosed in a red and white ornamental frame. The same style of frame appears with every uncovered image. This suggests that the paintings formed a unified program. Under the frames there is a visible painted inscription the content of which, is still unfortunately unbeknownst to us.

The uncovered images are very damaged. The painting has been scraped to achieve a better adhesion of the new plaster applied on top of it. It was executed in two layers of plaster. The first thicker layer was applied directly on the stone, and on the second layer a thinner layer of paint was applied.¹³⁹ Same as in other seventh-century churches, the restorers also discovered red and white decorative painting in squinches, on stone joints, on arches, and so on. This painting was applied before any plaster directly on the wall’s surface.

¹³⁹ Zarian. Lamoureux 2019, p. 186.

Various fragments of painted plaster on every wall of the church suggest that the entire church was originally painted.¹⁴⁰

3.6 Aruch cathedral

Architectural context

The cathedral is located near the village Aruch (earlier called Talish) in the Aragatsotn region. It was built by Grigor Mamikonean the prince of Armenia, appointed by Caliph Mu'awiya I (c. 597,603 or 605–680) between the years 662 and 685.¹⁴¹ It is attested by a dedicatory inscription located in a simple frame on an eastern facade. The inscription says:

In the 29th year of Constans in the month of Mareri on this day of the 15th, this holy cathedral was founded by means of Grigor Mamikonean prince of Armenia and Heline the spouse of the same, for the intercession of the builders.¹⁴²

The cathedral is mentioned in nine other medieval written sources. Their analysis confirmed the dating of the church into the second half of the seventh century, most probably after 661.¹⁴³ It is important to highlight that the inscription mentions the name of the Byzantine emperor Constans II.

The History of John the Catholicos and chronicles of John of Draskhanakert mention a palace which Grigor Mamikonean built close to the church.¹⁴⁴ Foundations of the palace were discovered during archeological excavations in the 1950s. The excavated complex consists of several rooms arranged around a large oblong hall, as well as a gallery to the north, pierced by a colonnade overlooking the southern facade of the church. Its size and stylistic features have been compared to the catholicosal palace in Dvin.¹⁴⁵ On the site, archeologists also discovered foundations of a funerary chapel to the south of the cathedral,

¹⁴⁰ Zarian. Lamoureux 2019, pp. 183–195.

¹⁴¹ See Harutyunyan 1946; Lejosne 2020, pp. 35–40.

¹⁴² *Ի ԵՒ Թ ԱՄԻ ԿՈՍՏԱՆԾԻՆԻ ՄԱՐԵՐԻ / ԲԻ ԱՄՍՈՅ ՈՐ ԱՒ[Ր] Ժ ԵՒ Ե ՀԻՄՆ / ԱՐԿԵՑԱԲ ՍՈՒՐԲ ԿԱԹՈՂԻԿԷՍ / Ի ՉԵՂՆ ԳՐԻԳՈՐԻ ՄԱՍԻԿՈՆԵԱՆԻ / ՀԱՅ[Ի]ՈՑ ԻՇԽԱՆԻ ԵՒ ՀԵՂԻՆԷ / Ի ՆՈՐԻՆ ՉՈՒԳԱԿԸՑԻ / Ի ԲԱՐԵԽԱԲ ՍՈՒԹԻՒՆ ՇԻՆԱԲ / ՂԱՑ ՉՍԱ* in Strzygowski 1918, p. 46–47; Greenwood 2004, p. 86

¹⁴³ See Lejosne 2020, pp. 35–38.

¹⁴⁴ Khatchatrian 1974, p. 28.

¹⁴⁵ Concerning the palace in Dvin see Harutyunyan 1950.

accompanied by a stepped pedestal for a stela and a nearby cemetery.¹⁴⁶ During another round of excavations in the 1980s, archeologists discovered a massive fortification of 200 m to the southeast, with at least five watchtowers. Kazaryan suggested that it is a roman fortification from the times of the Arsacid dynasty, since Aruch, in that time served as a military camp.¹⁴⁷

The excavations in the 1950s also revealed foundations of another three-nave building to the southeast from the cathedral. First, they were identified as an annex to the palace. Only after new round of excavations in 2005 were the foundations identified as a 4th-5th century basilica.¹⁴⁸ The archeologists also revealed remains of a pagan temple dating back to the pre-Christian period. Such findings allowed Sargsyan to set a chronology of the site. First there was a pagan temple which was ruined during the country's conversion to Christianity. On its ruins a Christian temple had been built, which dated between the fourth and the fifth century. It was only until the seventh century, when the new cathedral and the palace were built by Grigor Mamikonean. Thus, in Aruch the complex consisted of a cathedral, an older church built on a site of a pagan temple, the funerary chapel, a cemetery and finally, the palace.

Concerning the seventh-century cathedral, it is a large (ca 17 x 35 m) domed-hall building with an oblong plan. The apse is inscribed in the plan, but two monumental niches in the eastern façade separate the space of the apse from two chapels which are flanking it on both sides. There are three entrances to the church which used to be sheltered by a portico. Like the Talin cathedral, walls of Aruch are pierced by many windows which create a big, open space full of light inside the church. The perfectly round drum of the dome is situated right in the middle of the architecture, placed on pendentives, and is supported by four engaged pillars. The entire church rests on a three stepped stylobate. The sculptural decoration is sober, composed only of decorative, nonfigurative bands above every window, and a decorative cornice under the roof. The emphasis is placed on the eastern façade with its two monumental niches and two decorative bands with triple arches. The façade is also enriched by a relief, winged-cross, and a dedicatory inscription under the central window.

¹⁴⁶ Hasratyan 2010.

¹⁴⁷ Kazaryan 2012, p. 72. Aruch is mentioned in the chronicles of Egishe (50s-60s of the 5th century) as a winter residence for the imperial army. See Matevosyan 1987, pp. 10–16.

¹⁴⁸ Sargsyan 2007.

During the most recent excavations in 2012, archeologists discovered original roof tiles. They were decorated with a palm tree motive and painted.¹⁴⁹ The style of the decorations supports the dating of the cathedral into the seventh century.

Monumental painting of Aruch

In the apsidal zone of the Aruch cathedral is one of the most important fresco decorations of early medieval Armenia and is still partially preserved. The fresco was studied in the 50s by Durnovo, in the 70s by Kotandjyan, and in the 80s by Matevosyan.¹⁵⁰ Durnovo observed fragments of plaster with pigments and traces of preliminary drawings in every part of the church's interior except for the side apses.¹⁵¹ Unfortunately, only the apsidal composition could be recognized, and now all the other fragments observed by Durnovo are irreversibly lost. Both, Durnovo and Kotandjyan, observed that within the apse, a standing Christ was placed on a jeweled pedestal with an open scroll in his left hand. On the scroll there is an inscription, a quotation from the Gospel of John 14:21:

He who has my commandments and keeps them is he who loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, I will love him and make myself known by him.

Durnovo also noticed a fragment of plaster in the conch depicting drapery and a tip of a shoe. She identified the figure as an angel and assumed that on the other side of Christ there is a parallel figure. Those fragments were not seen ever again. The conch is separated by an elegant acanthus frieze. Durnovo was especially enthusiastic about the frieze because she saw it as a continuation of the Hellenistic tradition in Armenian art, as well as proof of the seventh century dating of the Aruch fresco. Another argument in support of this dating, is a note in the Lewond Chronicles (end of the eight century) which says that Grigor Mamikoean built the church in Aruch and decorated it in memory of his name.¹⁵² Matevosyan later ascribed the date of the fresco execution to the year 666.¹⁵³

Under the frieze there are six standing figures of apostles. Durnovo hypothesized that another six apostles were depicted on the other side of the chancel and the Virgin Mary was

¹⁴⁹ Mirijanyan, Alexanyan 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Durnovo 1952; Kotandjyan 1978; Matevosyan 1981.

¹⁵¹ Durnovo 1952, p. 63.

¹⁵² Durnovo 1952, p. 55; The quote is translated into French in Khatchatrian 1974, p. 28. "*Il (Grigor Mamikonean) éleva dans la province Aragatsotn, dans le domaine Aroutj, une maison de prière, temple de gloire et de nom de Dieu et le décora à la mémoire de son nom.*"

¹⁵³ Matevosyan 1981.

in the middle. In such a case, the apse would bear a composition of the Ascension scene, same as depicted in the famous sixth century Syrian Rabulla Gospel. Durnovo also discovered a small inscription under the figure of Christ saying: *Ստեփաննոս ն[կ]ա[ր]եաց* meaning “Stephanos painted,” but the paleographical analysis classified the inscription to a later date.¹⁵⁴

Kotandjyan sees the painting in Aruch as the Hellenistic style of Armenian painting. The footstool and the scroll show the implementation of spatial perspective. The figure of Christ stands in perfect *contrapposto*, and it is depicted in perfect proportions 1:7. Even the text is written on the scroll in a way which follows the perspective, and the use of colors, especially the cold tones, emphasize this point. Kotandjyan discovered use of gold color on the footstool, and red in the garment of Christ.¹⁵⁵ Another very Hellenistic feature was observed above the figures of two apostles in the chancel. There, Kotandjyan described a decorative painting in a frame which depicts fake marble.¹⁵⁶

During the cleaning, Kotandjyan discovered nails which were used to support the plaster in the conch. For him, it served as an argument for an exceptional quality of the Armenian fresco technique. He also reports about vandalization of the fresco in the 30s of the twentieth century, when a group of boys influenced by communist propaganda used the head of Christ as a target for shooting.¹⁵⁷ This was most probably not the first time that the fresco was vandalized. It has been reported that in the 1870s, Muslims from a nearby village were using the church as a barn.¹⁵⁸

3.7 Mren cathedral

Architectural context

Today, the Mren cathedral is located in the easternmost part of Turkey near the border zone with modern day Armenia; however, throughout the majority of its history, the church and the city of Mren was part of Armenian lands and culture. It was once a part of Shirak – a historical district of medieval Armenia – which, together with the neighboring district

¹⁵⁴ Durnovo 1952, p. 63–65.

¹⁵⁵ Kotandjyan 1978, pp. 168–171.

¹⁵⁶ Kotandjyan 2017, p. 102.

¹⁵⁷ Kotandjyan 2017, note 3, p. 105.

¹⁵⁸ Mchitaryan 1870, p. 35.

Arsharunik, was ruled by the Kamsarakan family.¹⁵⁹ Mren is located just about thirty kilometers from the Armenian royal city of Ani, and thus, it has a rich history.¹⁶⁰ The presence of the church in Mren can be spotted in written sources back into the fifth century.¹⁶¹ However, we can only hypothesize whether there was an earlier structure before the current domed basilica, or not. After the ninth century, the city served as a summer residence for the Bagratid kings. By the tenth century, the church in Mren was bishopric, which is confirmed by inscriptions referring to it as *ԿԱԹՈՂՈՍԿԵ* (cathedral). So, although today the cathedral stands in solitude on a wide plateau and it is almost impossible to approach it, it was for sure a part of a flourishing and important city. Inscriptions carved into its walls attests to vineyards, gardens, summer palaces, and chapels built close to its vicinity. It is believed that Mren was abandoned during Turkman tribes' invasions in the fourteenth century.¹⁶²

The dedicatory inscription, according to which, the church is dated into the 40s of the seventh century, also speaks about a special status of the cathedral. It says:

In the ... year of Heraclius happily victorious king, the office of prince an ... all-praiseworthy *patrik, kowropalat* and *spara[pet...]* and Assyria and the episcopate of [... Te]ovpilos and the office of *tanuter* Nerse[h ...] on the Aršarunik this holy church was built [for the intercession of] the Kamsarakans and Mren and all¹⁶³

The inscription mentions the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610–641), the local general in chief David Saharouni (638-641), bishop Theophilos and Nerseh Kamsarakan – lord of Shirak and Arsharounik. Maranci argues that the church was built together by Dawit Saharouni, Nerseh Kamsarakan and bishop Theophilos, which are all also depicted on the lintel of the western portal.¹⁶⁴ The cathedral is thus a result of cooperation of two Armenian

¹⁵⁹ Maranci 2015, p. 33.

¹⁶⁰ More on Ani in *Ani: world architectural heritage of a medieval Armenian capital*, Peter S. Cowe ed., Leuven 2001.

¹⁶¹ The History of Armenians by Lazar P'arpec'i mentions a specific priest, Xoren from Mren. This indicates the existence of a church in Mren in the fifth century. In *The History of Lazar P'arpec'i*, Robert W. Thompson transl. and ed., Leuven 1991, pp. 82, 98.

¹⁶² See Maranci 2015, pp. 33–39.

¹⁶³Left half: *ՈՐՂԻՆՆԵՐԱ(Կ)/ԼԻՐԱՐԵՅԱՂԹՕ/ՂԹԱԳԱԲՈՐԻ / ՅԻՇԽԱ / ՈՒԹԵ /*

ՈՅԵԲԱՍՈՐԻՅԵԳԵՊԻ/ՄԿՈՊՈՍԻԹԵԱՆ Ն/ՍՐԱՎ /

ԿԱՅԵԲԱՇ/ԱՐՈ(Ի)ՆԵԱՑՏԵԱ/ՌՆՇԻՆԵՑԱԲ/ՍՈՒՐՔԵԿ/ԵՂԵՑ /

Right half: *ՄԵՆԱԳՈՎ Պ/ԱՏՐԻԿՈՒՐ/ԱՊԱՂԱՏԻԵ/ԻՍՐԱՐԱ*

ՈՎՓԻՂՈՍԻ/ԵԲԻՏԱՆՈՒ/ՏԵՐՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՆԵՐՍԵ

ՈՒԹԻԲՆ ԿԱՄ/ՍԱՐԱԿԱՆ Ա/ՑԵԲՍՐԵՆՈՅ/ԵԲԱՄԵՆ in Maranci 2015, pp. 41–42.

¹⁶⁴ Maranci 2015, pp. 43–44.

princes, and a bishop sheltered by the Byzantine emperor. No wonder that the cathedral of Mren is the second largest preserved church of the seventh century Caucasus to this day.

The church is a large (32.5 x 20 m) domed basilica with an inscribed cross. It is built on a prolonged rectangular plan with an eastern apse protruding from the mass of the church. The dome is situated in the center of the inner cross on four large pillars supporting the octagonal dome on squinches. The apse is pierced by three windows and flanked by two chapels. Under the altar zone there is a crypt. The church could be accessed through four doors – the main one in the western wall, one to the North, and two to the South.

Mren also preserved an important sculptural decoration highlighting every opening of its walls. Not only that, but every window is decorated with a relief band of geometric patterns, and some of them bear a figural decoration. The window of the southern apse is decorated by a relief of two serpents, and the tails are tangled into a knot in the center of the window. The Northern apse window is flanked by two beasts and crowned by a bust of an orant. The Thierry's identified the scene as Daniel in the Lion's Den. The entire perimeter of the building is also highlighted by a sculpted cornice.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, the dome is decorated by relief rays attached to concentric discs, same as in Saint-Hripsime and Talin.¹⁶⁶

The portals of the western and northern entrances are especially important as they bear a figurative sculptural decoration. The western portal even has an entire sculptural composition preserved. On the tympanum, two angels are holding an orb sheltered by an arch with a vine foliage relief. On the lintel there are six figures – Christ with apostles Peter and Paul, and on their sides, two secular figures and one cleric. Clearly, they are the donors Dawit Saharouni, Nerseh Kamsarakan and bishop Theophilus.¹⁶⁷ On the northern portal, only the lintel is carved. It depicts what seems to be a narrative scene: a kneeling smaller figure with a long-handled cross, flanked by two bowing figures (one with a censor, probably a cleric), a tree, and a horse. The Thiery's and Maranci agreed that the scene likely shows a historical event – The return of the true cross by the emperor Heraclius.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Thierry, Thiery 1971, pp. 56–57.

¹⁶⁶ Donabédian 2008, p. 110.

¹⁶⁷ Maranci 2015, p. 63.

¹⁶⁸ Thierry, Thiery 1971, p. 72; Maranci 2015, p. 71.

Monumental painting of Mren

The murals in Mren were first described by the Thierry's 1971. It is in a fragmented state with vanished colors, and only a drawing can be recognized, which is also in poor condition. In the conch, they spotted an image of Christ standing on a jeweled pedestal and holding an open scroll. They interpreted the image as a Theophanic vision. They also saw a series of medallions with busts on an intrados and a line of apostles in the chancel. On the northern wall, they were able to identify an image of a bishop holding a book. Stylistically, the Thierry's defined the painting as a particular form of post-Justinian art.¹⁶⁹

In 2013, the cathedral was visited by Maranci. With the use of digital photography, Maranci was able to give an updated description of the program with new details. Maranci revealed that Christ in Mren's conch has a beard and that his right arm is raised in a gesture of benediction. He is wearing a square neck chiton, a purple himation, and sandals. A garland of vine leaves emerges from behind the jeweled footrest. In the chancel, Maranci could identify eight of the twelve apostles according to inscriptions with their names and other attributes, such as Peter's keys. Busts in medallions on the intrados were identified as prophets, according to an inscription naming one of the figures as Jacob.¹⁷⁰ The most sensational discovery is undoubtedly an inscription on a triumphal arch, which is a quote from Psalm 92(93): 5:

Holiness befits your house, Lord, for the length of days.¹⁷¹

The same inscription can be found on the south façade of Yererouk, and on the mosaic in the church of dormition in Nicea, where it is also written on a triumphal arch.¹⁷² Maranci dated the inscription according to its letter forms into the seventh century.¹⁷³

There are also some other minor fragments of painting. On the northern wall, there is a standing cleric holding a book, enclosed in a rectangular frame. Next to it Maranci discovered one more cleric figure wearing an omophorion, and another figure was spotted on the southeast dome pier. The figure on the dome pier is located a bit under the capital,

¹⁶⁹ Thierry, Thiery 1971, pp. 76–77.

¹⁷⁰ Maranci 2013; Maranci 2015, pp. 77–92.

¹⁷¹ [SUV RNFU VUVBLE UR]PNTBTFV [SEP LV]T EPYUVB VFNFRU. Discovered and translated by Maranci in Maranci 2014–2015, p. 245.

¹⁷² Maranci 2014–2015, p. 251.

¹⁷³ Maranci 2014–2015, p. 246.

and is enclosed in a rectangular frame with a partially preserved inscription saying *UNFPP* (saint).¹⁷⁴

3.8 The church of Cromi in Georgia

Architectural context

The church of Cromi is located in the village Cromi in the Shida Kartli region of Georgia. It was proposed by Giorgi Chubinashvili that the church was originally a martyrium of St Ražden the protomartyr, since the first written source mentioning Cromi is a legend about the martyrdom of St Ražden. The saint was martyred in Cromi in 467, and in the turn of the sixth century, his remains were transferred to the monastery of Nikozi.¹⁷⁵ Archeological excavations discovered marble fragments of an earlier church. Some of them are inserted into the foundations of the current church. This means, that the original fifth century martyrium of St Ražden had been rebuilt during the seventh century.¹⁷⁶

The church in Cromi was dated by Chubinashvili between 626 and 635 according to an inscription in Georgian, saying: “Holy church, have mercy on *ipathos* Stephanos.”¹⁷⁷ The inscription theory was dismissed by Donabedian and Kazaryan who argued that the inscription does not have the position, style, nor the paleography suitable for a dedicatory inscription from the seventh century. Kazaryan then dated the church according to a stylistic analysis into the last quarter of the seventh century.¹⁷⁸ But Donabedian and most recently David Khostaria argues that stylistically the church belongs into the 40s of the seventh century comparing it with other monuments of the so-called ‘Djvari type,’ such as St Gajane, Odzun, Mren, and Bagavan. Khostaria noted that the architectural form of Cromi clearly points towards the imperial architecture of the first half of the seventh century. According to the scholar, emperor Heraclius might have passed through Cromi during his military campaign against Persia. Since the shrine of protomartyr Ražden must have been an

¹⁷⁴ Maranci 2015, pp. 77–92.

¹⁷⁵ Chubinashvili 1939, pp. 4–5; Chubinashvili 1969, pp. 9–10.

¹⁷⁶ Khostaria 2021.

¹⁷⁷ Chubinashvili 1939, pp. 6–7; Chubinashvili 1969, pp. 10–11.

¹⁷⁸ Donabedian 2008, p. 118; Kazaryan vol. III 2012, pp. 333–336.

important pilgrimage site, the emperor likely ordered to build a new church for this purpose – the cathedral of Cromi.¹⁷⁹

Architecturally, the church bears many similarities with Armenian churches of that period. The church is classified as a basilica with a dome in the middle. The entire structure is placed on a three-stepped stylobate. From the west, there is a narthex, which is protruding from the southern and northern side from the mass of the church. Two galleries run along the nave from both sides. They can be approached from a staircase in the northern protrusion of the narthex. The dome rests on squinches and on four free standing pillars, but it was rebuilt at least twice already during the Middle Ages. The altar space is original, however. It is slightly elevated, contains a two-step bench glued to the semicircular wall of the apse, and it is separated from the nave by a stone fence. The apse is pierced by one window and has two chapels on both sides. Concerning the exterior, the eastern façade is highlighted by two monumental niches with inserted columns. The church can be entered through three doors. These doors used to be adorned with two-columned portals and are still crowned with winged crosses in lunates. The door openings are embellished with decorative friezes. Today, the church has poor sculptural decoration as a result of restorations from the second half of the twentieth century. Originally its facades were entirely encircled by a decorative cornice, and every window was embellished with a decorative band. An impressive detail is the stone miniature of the church located on the roof's peak above the western façade.¹⁸⁰

Monumental painting of Cromi

Uvarova's contribution from the end of the nineteenth century is the first source on the state of the mosaic in the apse. Uvarova identified the mosaic as the Vision of Ezekiel. She saw Christ enthroned, dressed in dark purple chiton, and a blessing with one hand while the other was holding a scroll with a Georgian inscription. Christ is accompanied by two standing figures on both sides. At the same time, Uvarova noticed fragments of fresco painting on the eastern wall and on some pilasters, but she thought they were of a later date.¹⁸¹ In 1916, the mosaic was studied by Smirnov. After his careful examination, Smirnov concluded that the mosaic depicts Christ standing on a footstool decorated with precious

¹⁷⁹ Khostaria 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Kazaryan vol.III 2012, pp. 325–326.

¹⁸¹ Uvarova 1894, p. 183.

gems, with his right hand raised, and in his left hand he is holding an open scroll. On the scroll there is a combination of two passages from the Gospel of Saint John in old Georgian, saying:

I am the light of the world; I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he is dead. (John 8:12; 11:25)¹⁸²

Christ is accompanied by two figures of apostles. Behind them, there could be two pelmets depicted on both sides. Smirnov identified the scene as an iconographical concept, the *Traditio legis*.¹⁸³ The band under the conch was decorated with half-circle rosettes, and under it, there was a band with an inscription in Georgian and Greek. The inscription cannot be deciphered because only a small fragment is preserved.¹⁸⁴ Smirnov dated the mosaic between the seventh and the eighth century. In 1932, the mosaic was put down and stored in the Tbilisi Museum.¹⁸⁵

Smirnov and Chubinashvili did not pay any attention to the fresco fragments in the upper part of the chancel. However, in the 1950s, Shalva Amiranashvili took the paintings into consideration, even though his interpretation of them was later disproved. Amiranashvili identified a small image of *Hetoimasia* in the conch, right above Christ's head. Although, it is not clear on what basis the scholar recognized this image. Amiranashvili also noticed two standing figures on both sides of a window. The window itself was adorned with medallions containing busts of martyrs with crosses in their right hand. One of them was accompanied by an inscription with the name "Stephanos." The central medallion depicts a jeweled four-armed cross.¹⁸⁶ Amiranashvili suggested that Christ in the apse does not pass the law to his apostles, but rather, he is showing his fate by pointing his right hand up to *Hetoimasia*. According to Amiranashvili, some of the old-Georgian words in the inscription from the scroll have a form typical to the sixth and seventh centuries. In conclusion, the scholar dated the mosaic and frescoes into the same period – the seventh century.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Smirnov 1935, p. 15.

¹⁸³ Smirnov 1935, p. 21.

¹⁸⁴ Smirnov 1935, p. 6.

¹⁸⁵ Chubinashvili 1969.

¹⁸⁶ Amiranashvili 1950, p. 125.

¹⁸⁷ Amiranashvili 1950, p. 124.

In 1967, Viktor Lazarev identified two figures in the conch not as apostles, but rather, as two angels. According to Lazarev, the entire composition reflects a Theophanic idea, and its connection with the Ascension in its scheme. Lazarev also noticed vessels with flowers located between Christ and angels.¹⁸⁸

Fragments of the mural in the chancel were once again reconsidered after further examination. Scholars identified a figure of the Virgin Orant above the central window.¹⁸⁹ On both sides of the window there are figures of the apostles. The ones on both sides of the window were identified as St Peter with keys and St Paul with a book. Based on this new information, Zaza Skhirtladze reconstructed the entire iconography of the altar space. The scholar arrived at the same conclusion as Lazarev: in the apse of Cromi, there is a Theophanic vision in the Ascension scheme.¹⁹⁰ The lower part of the chancel was, according to Skhirtladze, left unpainted.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Lazarev 1967, pp. 90–91.

¹⁸⁹ Amiranashvili also saw the fragment, but he identified it incorrectly as a Mandylion. In: Amiranashvili 1950, p 125.

¹⁹⁰ Skhirtladze 1990–1991.

¹⁹¹ Skhirtladze 1997, p. 173.

4. ARUCH, MREN, CROMI AND TALIN: IMAGES OF ORTHODOXY AND TRACES OF FORGOTTEN UNION

The art historical research of the last century literally saved the phenomenon of early medieval Armenian monumental painting. Even today new frescoes are raising from the ashes, and more and more discoveries are being added to the catalogue. From all the little fragments of painting in more than thirty different churches, scholars and restorers were able to revive five apsidal compositions. Two of them contain an image of Christ standing on a jeweled pedestal. His head is encircled in a nimbus with a cross, his right arm is raised, and in his left hand he holds an open scroll. In both cases, a row of apostles occupies the chancel of the apse. The two magnificent cathedrals, whose apses are decorated with such an image, are both built by Armenian nobleman around the middle of the seventh century, and both bear names of Byzantine emperors carved into their walls. They are the cathedral of Mren (ca 640) and the cathedral of Aruch (ca 660).¹⁹²

While studying the bibliography on the two cathedrals, one cannot avoid comparing their painting with the painting in the church of Cromi (ca 640) in neighboring Georgia.¹⁹³ This architectural masterpiece used to be decorated in its apse by a mosaic with the exact same iconography.¹⁹⁴ Not only is the Christ in its conch depicted in the same position, but a fresco in its chancel shows a row of apostles together with the Virgin Orant. On the mosaic, Christ is most likely accompanied by two angels.¹⁹⁵ Durnovo also suggested the presence of the two angels in Aruch; although, her hypothesis is based on a small piece of fresco which disappeared without ever being documented on, other than in written text.¹⁹⁶ The church of Cromi was recently identified as part of building campaigns of the emperor Heraclius in the first half of the seventh century. The church is thus, most probably, sponsored by a Byzantine emperor.¹⁹⁷ What is also triggering, is that in the conch of Cromi, as well as the conch in

¹⁹² On the painting of Aruch, see Durnovo 1952; Kotandjyan 1978; Matevosyan 1981. On painting in Mren, see Thierry, Thierry 1971; Maranci 2015. On more about Aruch and Mren, see the part The church of Mren in this thesis.

¹⁹³ The mosaic in Cromi was compared to Aruch and Mren in Durnovo 1952, p. 65; Maranci 2015, p. 90; Lejosne 2020; Foletti, Meinecke 2021.

¹⁹⁴ On the mosaic of Cromi, see Smirnov 1935; Skhirtladze 1990–1991; Foletti-Quadri 2013; Kravčiková 2022. More on the church in see the part Cromi church in this thesis.

¹⁹⁵ Lazarev 1967, pp. 90–91.

¹⁹⁶ Durnovo 1952, p. 63.

¹⁹⁷ Khostaria 2021.

Aruch, the scroll held by Christ contains different quotes from the Gospel of John. But while in Cromi the text is written in Old Georgian, in Aruch it is written in Classical Armenian.¹⁹⁸

The apse of the Talin cathedral in Armenia contains, at first glance, a completely different image. In the conch there is an open book placed on a jeweled throne flanked by two angelic creatures. The apsidal composition around this main image is strikingly similar to the church of Mren. This is not only because of the apostles in the chancels of both churches distributed between three windows, but also because of a chain of medallions with busts of prophets decorating their intradoses, and their domes used to be decorated with relief crosses, as well. The Talin cathedral is believed to be built by a prince of Armenia appointed by emperor Justinian II in the 80s of the seventh century. Connections with the Byzantine imperial court are thus more than plausible.¹⁹⁹

The four apsidal compositions were interpreted in terms of their iconography in two different ways. In the early bibliography, scholars identified the image of the standing Christ as a specific form of the so-called *Traditio legis*, which was included in a scheme with the scene of the Ascension.²⁰⁰ Later, scholars began to interpret the image as a Theophanic vision, sometimes also highlighting the inclusion into the scene of the Ascension.²⁰¹ The fresco from Talin was, until very recently, interpreted as *Hetoimasia* – i.e. a throne prepared for the second coming of the Christ – in the Ascension scheme.²⁰² Only in recent years, after Maranci's expedition to Mren, did scholarship start to admit new possibilities for the interpretation of the four images – their actual historical and doctrinal meaning.

In this chapter, I will compile new discoveries and hypothesis in order to ask the most important question which was avoided for almost a century: What happens if those apsidal compositions would be studied in their architectural and historical context? Who were the original viewers of those images, and what message were they supposed to convey through them? If we could answer at least one of these questions, we would get closer to answering

¹⁹⁸ Lejosne 2020.

¹⁹⁹ See Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 154; Kotandjyan 2017, p. 99; Hermanová 2020; Foletti 2021. For more on Talin see the part Talin cathedral in this thesis.

²⁰⁰ Durnovo 1952; Smirnov 1935; Hakobyan 2016.

²⁰¹ Lazarev 1967, pp. 90–91; Hermann 1970, pp. 49–51; Thierry, Thierry 1971, pp. 76–77; Skhirtladze 1997, p. 173.

²⁰² Kotandjyan 2017, p. 99.

others as well. However, before that, the conclusions on iconography of the apsidal images must be reexamined.

4.1 Iconographical analysis

Traditio legis or Theophany?

The image of the standing Christ with a raised right hand and a scroll in his left hand was not an unusual sight in Early Christian art. Such iconography is known across western and eastern Christian art from the fourth century onwards, and it is generally called the *Traditio legis* or *Dominus Legem Dat*.²⁰³ Up until the recent studies conducted by Spieser, Christ was considered as giving a scroll to either St Peter or St Paul, flanking him on both sides. Sometimes Christ is standing on a hill out of which flow four rivers, creating a triangular composition with the apostles. An example of such a scene can be found on a mosaic in the mausoleum of St Costanza in Rome (ca 370).²⁰⁴ Other examples, like the apsidal mosaic of St Cosmas and Damian in Rome (ca 530), show Christ standing on clouds, or, like on the lintel of the western portal of the Armenian basilica in Mren (ca 640), being just flanked by slightly shorter figures of the two apostles.²⁰⁵ Sometimes the scroll bears an inscription saying, “*Dominus Legem Dat*” or “*Dominus Pacem Dat*,” like for example, on the mosaic of the Naples baptistery (362–408).²⁰⁶ This inscription led scholars to interpret the scene as a literal depiction of the quote. Although, Spieser rightly points out that the quote represents a rather familiar theme, since in the writings of the church fathers, Christ is described as “the one who gives the law.”²⁰⁷

As for an interpretation of the iconography, there are many different opinions. Some scholars traced the origin of the iconography to imperial imagery, referencing an imperial legal ritual, during which, the emperor is handing over a law code to proconsuls.²⁰⁸ Such a reading can be classified as another example of the category coined by Matthews as, the “Emperor Mystique,” which uses very loose connotations to label the majority of the Early

²⁰³ For the rich bibliography on this subject, see the synthesis by Spieser 2004; Foletti, Quadri 2013; as well as the most recent studies: Spieser 2015, pp. 244–267; Couzin 2015; Bergmaier 2017.

²⁰⁴ One good synthesis is by Borůvková 2020.

²⁰⁵ On this composition, see Foletti 2017 with previous bibliography.

²⁰⁶ For the latest monography from previous literature, see Croci 2019.

²⁰⁷ Spieser 2004, p. 9; Spieser 2015, p. 249.

²⁰⁸ For an example, see Kollwitz 1936, pp. 60–61.

Christian images as a copy of imperial imagery.²⁰⁹ According to some scholars, such imagery explicitly bears a political message. Since Christ is handing the law mostly to St Peter, the composition conveys the primacy of the Roman seat.²¹⁰ This reading was dismissed by Foletti and Quadri who pointed out, that not only are there many examples where the scroll is given to Paul instead, but also that such an interpretation is the result of the contra-Reformation, which forces the viewer to look for visual evidence of Peter's primacy in older images.²¹¹ Many scholars also believe that the motif originates from wall painting, and identified the earliest prototype in the original apse of the Old St Peter Basilica in Rome (ca 350).²¹² This idea, as Spieser argues, is based on the already dismissed presupposition that the image conveys a primacy of the Roman seat, but also on the prejudice that such an important composition could not originate in funerary art – which is considered “minor,” but had to be taken from “great” architecture.²¹³ Some scholars see the image as a visual representation of the mission of the apostles as described in Matthew 28:16–20, based on the western or rather “Protestant” assumption that Early Christian art illustrates the Bible.²¹⁴ There are more satisfactory opinions, according to which *Traditio legis* represents an eschatological image²¹⁵ or a depiction of the prophecy of Isaiah 2:2–4.²¹⁶ Those readings are, in some cases, plausible if considered in the wider context, but the broad use of the image and the variety of iconographical elements suggest a much more universal meaning.

Images are often labeled as *Traditio legis*, even though there are no apostles, no hill with four rivers, or a law being passed to St Paul rather than to St Peter. Many times, the only common trait is the Christ holding a scroll or a book. Considering the differences, Spieser rejects the idea that the *Traditio legis* must be a scene showing Christ's terrestrial life. Rather, the image represents a Theophanic vision which puts a special emphasis on Christ's divine nature. The scholar pointed out that the image appeared on a sarcophagi in the mid-fourth century, where it replaced images of Christ performing miracles. Spieser sees the development as a reaction to Arianism, and a new need to depict Christ as equal to God

²⁰⁹ Matthews 1999, pp. 3–22.

²¹⁰ For an example, see Franke 1972.

²¹¹ Foletti, Quadri 2013, p. 29.

²¹² Van der Meer 1938, p. 54; Bøgh Rasmussen 2001, pp. 38–45.

²¹³ Spieser 2004, p. 13.

²¹⁴ See Schultze 1895.

²¹⁵ Kollowitz 1936, p. 61; Christe 1976, p. 42; Bøgh Rasmussen 2001, p. 32; Couzin 2015, pp. 64–65.

²¹⁶ Bergmeier 2017, pp. 38–42.

– meaning depicting his divine nature.²¹⁷ Such an image is designed to distantly resemble imperial imagery, while also providing enough differences as to not be confused with an image of an emperor.²¹⁸

Following the idea of Spieser and further research, the conchal images from Aruch, Mren and Cromi can be interpreted primarily as Theophanic visions. To understand that the Christ painted in the apsis is a divine figure, a medieval viewer was given several clues. Firstly, Christ is depicted standing on a jeweled pedestal. Earlier examples of a standing Christ showed him standing on a mountain, from which, flows four rivers; on a globe; or on clouds. The mountain with four rivers might refer to Mount Sion, to paradise, to Christ, or to Church, being intentionally ambiguous enough to allow multiple interpretations.²¹⁹ On the other hand, a globe and clouds are probably two different solutions to one artistic problem: How to depict a so-called *firmamentum* – a heavenly dome which separates the lower and upper waters, which in our modern understanding might be loosely translated as “heaven.”²²⁰ The globe or clouds might both be a reference to the Book of Exodus 24:10, which describes how Moses climbed Mount Sinai and saw God:

And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness.²²¹

The jeweled footstool is probably just another way how to convey the same concept – an omnipotent ruler of heaven and earth. For example, in Ezekiel 1:26 the prophet describes how above a *firmamentum* a throne is placed on which God is seated in human form. However, the throne in Ezekiel 1:26 is described in the exact same way as the *firmamentum* in Exodus 24:10 – as having the appearance of a sapphire stone. Matthews also argues that to place Christ on a throne is to highlight his divinity, since in Roman pagan imagery a throne was an attribute of the gods.²²² However, in a situation where God is depicted standing, the throne and the footstool play the exact same role.

Secondly, the Christ in Cromi, and possibly also in Aruch, was flanked by two angels. In Mren, it is impossible to tell whether there were angles, because of the poor state

²¹⁷ Spieser 2004, p. 12; Spieser 2015, pp. 264–265.

²¹⁸ Spieser 1998, p. 65.

²¹⁹ Spieser 2015, pp. 278–279.

²²⁰ Foletti, Palladino 2022.

²²¹ Quote taken from the King James Version of Bible, translated in 1611.

²²² Matthews 1999, p. 107–108.

of preservation the fresco was in. Their presence in Mren, however, cannot be excluded. Angelic creatures very often accompany Theophanic visions. After all, God appeared on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant Law between the wings of cherubs; and visions of the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah describe Theophany as an event accompanied by various angelic creatures.²²³ Christ also stands with his right hand raised. The powerful and almighty right hand of God is mentioned in several prophetic visions and theophanies, such as Isaiah 41, 62:8 and Exodus 15, often in a context which highlights Gods omnipotence.

All these images relate to some broader semantic and cognitive system, of which, they form a part.²²⁴ To achieve an understanding that an image depicts a Theophany, its authors borrow a full range of motifs from several biblical texts and other textual and pictorial sources, so that they are understandable to the viewers. An invention of images is not unusual if considered through the eyes of early church fathers.²²⁵ For example, John Chrysostom in his treatise *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, comments on God's condescension and how it is manifested in Theophanic visions. He quotes Hosea 12:10, where God is saying: "I have multiplied visions and have likened myself through the prophets." Chrysostom uses the biblical text to demonstrate that God reveals himself in a different form in every vision, so as to help those who gaze upon him understand what they are seeing.²²⁶ The same idea is also expressed by Cyril of Jerusalem in the commentary on John 1:18. Cyril writes:

"Having said, 'No one has ever yet seen God,' the Evangelist showed us that everything which the prophets spoke, such as Isaiah, that he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, Ezekiel, upon the Cherubim, and Daniel, on a throne, and certain others of them about beholding him—all those things belonged to condescension, not as though the naked essence itself were seen. For if they had seen the nature itself they would not have beheld it in different forms; for it is simple, formless, uncompounded, unlimited, and neither sits nor stands. For all these attributes belong to bodies, and neither any of the angels nor of the archangels sees him, much less any human being."²²⁷

²²³ See Exodus 25:22; Ezekiel 1:4–28; Isaiah 6:1–5. For general bibliography on angels in Byzantine art, see Peers 2001. For angelomorphic Christology see Gieschen 1998.

²²⁴ Spieser 2015, p. 15.

²²⁵ The same argumentation on the invention of images was used in Spieser 1998, p. 7.

²²⁶ Chrysostom 1984, p. 15; Kraehling McKey 1999, p. 148.

²²⁷ *Catena Graecorum Patrum in Novum Testamentum*, p. 189; Translated in Meeks 2002, p. 242.

The point was exemplified by Christa Ihm-Belting after examining early medieval apsidal compositions. Ihm-Belting concluded that apsidal images do not follow one concrete biblical text. They are rather a combination of several prophetic visions, namely, those of Ezekiel, Isaiah, and John's Revelation.²²⁸ The scholar raised the conclusion after studying apsidal compositions with an enthroned or seated Christ, but as I was trying to illustrate, the situation is no different in the case where Christ is standing. Thus, the conchal images from Aruch, Mren, and Cromi must also be understood as a compilation of biblical texts, and different textual and pictorial references which together create a Theophanic image suitable for certain viewers.

The book on a throne as a theophanic image

The same logic can be traced behind another seventh century Armenian apsidal image. In the conch of the Talin cathedral, there is a unique depiction which is found in such a prominent position solely in Armenia.²²⁹ In the conch, there is an open book placed on a jeweled throne in a mandorla flanked by two angelic creatures. The image was interpreted as a *Hetoimasia* – a throne prepared for the Second Coming of Christ.²³⁰ Although the throne with the attributes of God was later bound with an eschatological meaning, its primary interpretation was different.

The oldest representations of an empty throne in the Mediterranean sphere can be found on coins, marble sarcophagi, or in the temple of Magna Mater in Rome.²³¹ A throne with attributes of a certain person was regularly used to deputize for the absent person (or deity), and was a natural part of visual, as well as ritual culture in the Greco-Roman world.²³² The image and practice connected to it, was, after a slight transformation, transferred into the Christian sphere. For example, a liturgical ritual from seventh to eighth century Syria

²²⁸ Ihm 1960, p. 45. Ihm speaks specifically about apsidal paintings in two of the chapels of the Apa Apollo monastery in Bawit, Egypt; two frescoes in the Jeremiah monastery in Sakkara in Lower Egypt; the apse fresco of the David-Garedja Cave Church in Dodo, Georgia; S. Miquel in Egara, Catalonia; and the Latomou mosaic in the church of Hosios David in Thessaloniki.

²²⁹ A similar apsidal composition was identified in the Fundi Basilica, but instead of a book there was a cross, and instead of angelic creatures there was a lamb on a hill in front of the throne. On Fundi see Ihm 1960, pp. 181–182. The presence of a similar image is debated also in the apse of San Crisogono church in Rome. See Settecassi 1996, pp. 17–32; Foletti 2021.

²³⁰ Kotandjyan 2017, p. 99.

²³¹ Vollmer 2014, pp. 29–39.

²³² See chapter *Before the Hetoimasia: The Empty Throne as an Image and Object in the Late Antique Mediterranean (and beyond)* in Foletti 2021.

used an empty throne, specifically to represent the role of Christ. When a priest carried the throne to the altar, it was declared that Christ is entering Jerusalem.²³³

In my bachelor's thesis, I argued that an open book on a throne served as a personification of Christ, and as such, substituted for God.²³⁴ It was a newly invented Theophanic image, which was, according to Koutris introduced by Cyril of Alexandria at the first ecumenical council of Ephesus (431), from where it passed to Chalcedon, and later, to a secular sphere.²³⁵ In a letter to emperor Theodosius II, Cyril, bishop of Alexandria testified, that before the council of Ephesus started, in the middle of the assembly the church fathers set out another seat, and placed the holy Gospel upon it.²³⁶ The enthroned Gospel on the council of Ephesus took on the role of Jesus Christ, because, as Cyril writes, the Church fathers "issued [their] verdict, with the holy gospel-book placed in their midst indicating that Christ ... was present."²³⁷ The identification of the Gospel-book as Jesus Christ, the Son of God and personification of the truth, is crucial for the interpretation of the image of the enthroned book as a theophanic image.

This explanation is also supported by other elements of the image. Firstly, the image is situated in a conch – a place specifically reserved in Early Christian monumental painting for Christ the God, whether in the form of a cross, a figure or the *Theotokos*.²³⁸ Secondly, the throne is flanked by two angelic creatures whose wings are seeded with eyes. They might be the Seraphim from the Book of Revelation 4:6–8 or simply cherubs – guardians of the throne and gates to Eden, from Gen 3:24 and Psalm 99:1. In any case, the angelic creatures often accompany different theophanic visions. Finally, the throne is placed in the mandorla – a circle representing light, which encircles Christ in theophanic visions and emphasizes His divinity.²³⁹ Thus, the setting is identical with theophanic images of the enthroned Christ. The only difference is that the figure of Christ is in case of Talin, replaced by an open book.

²³³ Connolly 1915. More examples in Foletti 2021.

²³⁴ Hermanová 2020, p. 36–39.

²³⁵ On the history and invention of the image, as well as on the enthroned book as a personification of Jesus Christ, see Vollmer 2014; Koutris 2016.

²³⁶ Cyril of Alexandria 1673, VI, p. 251.

²³⁷ *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 1.1.3.84.10–13. Translated in Koutris 2016, p. 83.

²³⁸ Matthews 1999, pp. 97–98; Spieser 1998.

²³⁹ Matthews 1999, p. 118.

4.2 Images of orthodoxy

The standing Christ as an image of orthodoxy

Spieser notes that the image of the standing Christ with long hair and a scroll, and an image of an enthroned Christ (beardless or bearded), were used in the exact same funerary context in the fourth century. Whether the Christ was accompanied by twelve apostles or only by Peter and Paul, it seems like the images were just different variations of the same theme – Christ among his apostles.²⁴⁰ However, according to Spieser, it is the image of the enthroned Christ with a beard and long hair, which eventually took over the apses of Early Christian basilicas.²⁴¹ Spieser proposes that the image of the standing Christ with a scroll did not spread, perhaps, because it was rapidly misunderstood.²⁴² Regardless, the standing Christ was present in the repertoire of Early Christian images between the fifth and seventh centuries, even though the material evidence is not well preserved. The Syrian Gospel, Rabulla, as well as the apse of St Cosmas and Damian in Rome, prove that the image was in use during the sixth century in the East, as well as in the West. The standing Christ, is thus, one among the many different variations of the image of Christ the God that existed in the Early Middle Ages.²⁴³

In the seventh century Southern Caucasus, the apsidal imagery is no more diverse than around Mediterranean. Apses of Armenian churches contained images of the *Theotokos*, the standing bearded Christ with a scroll, the enthroned Christ with a book, and a non-anthropomorphic image of Christ in the form of an enthroned book.²⁴⁴ Apsidal compositions in Aruch, Mren, and Cromi have proven the popularity of the standing Christ image in major cathedrals of seventh-century Armenia and Georgia. On the other hand, the enthroned Christ is to be found in small monastery churches of seventh-century Armenia.²⁴⁵ But do those two images really represent the same Christ?

²⁴⁰ Spieser 2015, p. 316.

²⁴¹ Spieser 2015, p. 311.

²⁴² Spieser 2015, p. 360.

²⁴³ See Matthews 1999, chapter *Christ Chameleon*.

²⁴⁴ For a complete catalogue of Armenian monumental images of the seventh century, see Hakobyan 2016; Kotandjyan 2017.

²⁴⁵ An image of the enthroned Christ can be found in the churches of Lmbat, Karmravor and Kosh.

Spieser argues that an image of the standing Christ in the fifth century served as an explicit reference to the Nicene Creed, since images which only represented Christ's human nature became "suspect." It is no surprise that in the seventh century only those images survived a "natural selection," which show Christ as God, stressing his divine nature. In seventh-century Armenia, it was no longer the threat of Arianism which was pushing the selection further, but rather, the disputes between Monophysitism and Chalcedonism, and the very specific threat of Islam. For Muslims, Christ was a prophet, thus, a human whose wisdom was revealed to him by God. For Christians, on the other hand, Christ was God, although the debates about the precise relationship between Christ's divine and human nature were a point of rupture among Christians.²⁴⁶ Theophanic images of Christ the God, such as the enthroned or standing Christ might serve as an affirmation of Christianity's ultimate righteousness in opposition to Islam. Nevertheless, was there a different way of depicting Christ among confessors of Christian faith who accepted the dogma of Chalcedon and those who rejected it?

Showing Christ standing with a raised hand has a meaning; he is in a position of power and is seen as the ruler of the world. This gesture – the right hand raised, and the palm turned outward – is simultaneously a mark of power, protection, and defense against enemies.²⁴⁷ However, the same meaning can be ascribed to an image of Christ sitting on a jeweled throne. It might seem as if a standing figure with a raised right hand is an authoritative image, but it also might just be a perception from the modern viewer who is accustomed to seeing figures in a similar position on soviet monuments. Seeing Christ in his majesty sitting on a throne sparkled with precious stones, is, in my opinion, no more an authoritative image than Christ standing with a raised right hand. Above all, the throne was an attribute of the gods in the Greco-Roman world, and until now, it is the only way how we might imagine a king – as an ultimate authoritative figure. At this point, any attempt to deduce which of these two images evoked more authority in the eyes of an early medieval viewer, would be pure speculation. There is, however, a crucial difference between the two images. An enthroned figure is without a doubt, an image symbolizing God, or a deity. The divinity of the depicted subject is self-evident. The image of a standing figure, on the other

²⁴⁶ The opposition between Christian's and Muslim's vision of Christ and God are further developed in Peers 2007, pp. 41–43.

²⁴⁷ Schumacher 1959; Spieser 1998; Spieser 2015, p. 246. See especially Foletti, Meinecke 2021, p. 125.

hand, is more “normal,” more human-like. The divinity of this depicted subject is evident, but not so explicitly as when the figure is enthroned. Such an image, is thus, open to broader interpretation.²⁴⁸ The image of the standing Christ is more suitable to represent a specific doctrinal definition of Christ – the divine Christ and Christ the man in one figure, the unity of divine and human natures. The image of the standing Christ in Aruch, Mren, and Cromi could represent the orthodox doctrine established at the council of Chalcedon.

There is one more element to support such an interpretation. It was observed by Amiranashvili in the 50s that the mosaic in Cromi used to contain a small image of “a prepared throne” in the medallion located right above the figure of Christ. Amiranashvili suggested that Christ’s right hand was pointing at the image of “a prepared throne” to indicate the last judgement.²⁴⁹ I will, however, argue later in this chapter, that an image of a throne with certain attributes is a symbol of orthodoxy, since the installation of a Gospel book or scriptures on a throne was used in the ecumenical council since Ephesus (431), to guarantee the council’s truthfulness. If Christ is pointing at a throne with a book or scriptures in Cromi, he might be pointing at the symbol of the ecumenical councils representing orthodoxy. In Aruch and Mren, the upper part of the conch is, unfortunately, damaged. The composition in both conches leaves enough space above Christ for a medallion with a throne, although their existence is for now, purely hypothetical.

A book on a throne as an image of orthodoxy

Koutris in his PhD thesis on the presence of the Gospel book in the fifth century councils demonstrated, how since the Council of Ephesus (431) the enthroned book became a symbol of true orthodoxy. Placing the Gospel on a throne in the midst of the assembly was an act symbolizing not only the presence of Jesus Christ, but also the presence of Truth (Word of God). Through this act, it was declared that the book is placed in the center of Ephesus to lead the bishops to the true faith (orthodoxy). The Gospel was a guarantor of the council’s truthfulness, and a sense of orthodoxy.²⁵⁰ Koutris also argues that in Ephesus, Cyril

²⁴⁸ This argumentation is based on Spieser’s observation, that the strangeness of an image is a factor important for the depiction of divinity. In Spieser 2015, p. 377.

²⁴⁹ Amiranashvili 1950, p. 125. Amiranashvili describes the image as *уготованный престол* (a prepared throne). It is not clear what attributes were placed on the throne, nor on what basis the image was reconstructed. In later literature, it was already described as *hetoimasia*. See Hermann 1970, pp. 49–51.

²⁵⁰ Koutris 2016, p. 84.

of Alexandria invented the practice to enthrone a Gospel book at the council as a guarantor of truth; and thus, this established a tradition which was then practiced at the following ecumenical councils, namely, during the council of Chalcedon (451).²⁵¹ Such a practice taking place in Chalcedon is even more significant, because it was attested as the first time in the history of the Church councils, that a doctrinal pronouncement and a confession of faith is signed on the Gospel-book.²⁵²

The idea that the book on a throne symbolizes orthodoxy was further developed by Foletti. The scholar ties together several examples from Early Christian imagery of Rome, Constantinople, and Capua, where images of a book or the scriptures on a throne serve as a reminder of the true orthodoxy as determined at the council of Chalcedon.²⁵³ Foletti then continues with an analysis of Talin's apsidal image, concluding that he sees the conchal image in Talin as a representation of the true orthodoxy as established after the council of Chalcedon (451).²⁵⁴

Foletti, however, admits that the evidence connecting the image from a conch in Talin to the council of Chalcedon is, at the moment, very fragile. The same image of an enthroned book could refer to two different ecumenical councils, and thus, in this case to two different Christian doctrines. If the fresco in Talin was executed in the first quarter of the eighth century, after the establishment of the official doctrine of the Armenian apostolic church by the catholicos John of Odzun, the image could be interpreted as a reference to the council of Ephesus (431), and thus, to the doctrine of the Armenian Apostolic Church.²⁵⁵ Whereas, if the same fresco was executed in the 80s of the seventh century, under the patrimony of Nerseh Kamsarakan, it would refer to the council of Chalcedon (451) and to the orthodox doctrine. Nerseh Kamsarakan (689–693) was known to be appointed by Emperor Justinian II; the emperor who made the final attempt to create a pro-Chalcedonian union between the two churches.²⁵⁶ Considering the scholarly research from the last century, the scholarly community studying the cathedral of Talin unanimously agreed on the latter.

²⁵¹ Ibidem, pp. 155–156.

²⁵² Ibidem, p. 190.

²⁵³ Hermanová 2020, pp. 36–39; Foletti 2021, chapter 3 *The Book on the Throne: An Image of Orthodoxy?*.

²⁵⁴ Ibidem, chapter 4 *The Book on the Throne and the Question of the Armenian Self-Perception*.

²⁵⁵ Otsenatsi Catholicos 2010, pp. 28-31; Mahé 2012, p. 114.

²⁵⁶ Garsoïan 2012, p. 62.

Although, there is no source which would demonstrably assign the patrimony of Talin to Nerseh Kamsarakan; the fact that the neighboring church of St Mary contains an inscription with his name, the cathedral is located in the center of Kamsarakan's patrimony, and that the architecture was dated into the 80s of the seventh century, speaks in favor of this conclusion.²⁵⁷ In favor of Kamsarakan's patrimony of the Talin cathedral, is the generally accepted assumption that the political situation after the turn of the eighth century made it impossible to build a cathedral of Talin's stature, especially since it is decorated with paintings.²⁵⁸ Scholars studying the fresco in Talin claim that the painting is contemporary with the architecture.²⁵⁹ Thus, under given circumstances, the conchal fresco of the Talin cathedral can be interpreted as an image of Chalcedonian orthodoxy.

Quotes from the Gospel of John

There is one more element which needs to be addressed – inscriptions written on the open scrolls held by the Christ in both Aruch, and Cromi. The inscription from Mren, is unfortunately, impossible to reconstruct; however, Maranci proposed it could have similar content as found in Aruch and Cromi – a quote from the Gospel of John.²⁶⁰ While in Aruch the quote is written in Ancient Armenian, in Cromi it is written in Old Georgian. The quotes say:

Aruch: He who has my commandments and keeps them is he who loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, I will love him and make myself known by him. (John 14:21)²⁶¹

Cromi: I am the light of the world; I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he is dead. (John 8:12; 11:25)²⁶²

The Gospel of John holds a special status among the four Gospels. While the other three gospels (Synoptics) speak primarily about the acts of Jesus, the Gospel of John focuses on who Jesus is. It contains hardly any ethical teachings, except for a call to follow Him, instead, it is fully occupied with explaining the true nature of Christ and his status in relation

²⁵⁷ Hasratian 2000, p. 76; Thierry de Crussol 2002, p. 91; Donabédian 2008, p. 118; Kazaryan vol. III 2012, 154.

²⁵⁸ Mahé 2012, p. 114.

²⁵⁹ Donabédian 2008, p. 220; Kotanjyan 2017, p. 95.

²⁶⁰ Maranci 2015, p. 90.

²⁶¹ Durnovo 1952, p. 63.

²⁶² Smirnov 1935, p. 15.

to God.²⁶³ A transparent example posited by Barton, stresses on how the Passion narrative in John differs enormously from the Synoptics:

John's Jesus is not silent before Pontius Pilate but engages in a dialogue with him (John 18:33–8; 19:8–12), and gives the impression of being in charge of the events as they unfold: in the garden of Gethsemane (John 18:6) the soldiers fall to the ground when he utters the words, "I am," which are probably meant to be seen as his self-identification with God whose name is "I am" in Exodus 3:14. (There are, indeed, a number of sayings beginning with, "I am" throughout the Gospel: "I am the true vine", "I am the bread of life", "I am the good shepherd".) Even on the cross the dying Jesus does not utter a cry of despair, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" but the serene, "It is finished" (John 19:30).²⁶⁴

The quotes from the Gospel of John found in Aruch and Cromi are of the same nature. Both can be divided in two parts – one part addresses the reader and incites the reader to follow Christ (He who has my commandments and keeps them is he who loves me; He who believes in me will live, even though he is dead); and the other one speaks about the nature of God. The quote from Aruch speaks of the relationship between Christ and God in a way which stresses the unity of the two natures (he who loves me will be loved by my Father, I will love him and make myself known by him).²⁶⁵ The quote from Cromi starts by a self-identification of Christ starting with "I am," which, as mentioned previously by Barton, is the name of God in Exodus 3:14. Thematically the two quotes convey the same idea: Christ is simultaneously God and man and those who believe in him will be redeemed.

Biblical texts are in their utmost nature, ambiguous. All branches of Christianity have their roots based on the very same four Gospels; additionally, the same quotes might have a different ideological context, unless explained otherwise. This is not the case with quotes from Aruch and Cromi, however. The official Christology of the Armenian Apostolic Church does not differ that much from the Christology accepted at the council of Chalcedon. While Eastern Orthodoxy (the Chalcedonian or Byzantine one) sees the Christ as being in two natures the Oriental Orthodoxy (the non-Chalcedonian or Armenian one) described Christ as being of two natures.²⁶⁶ Thus, a quote which characterizes Christ as being simultaneously God and man is universally acceptable for both Churches because it does not

²⁶³ Barton 2019, p. 203.

²⁶⁴ Barton 2019, p. 204.

²⁶⁵ The reading of the two quotes was already stressed in Maranci 2015, p. 90.

²⁶⁶ On Armenian Christology see: Ormanian (1912) 2018; Garsoïan 1999; Cowe 2004; Aleksidze 2018.

specify the exact relationship between the two natures of Christ.²⁶⁷ Simultaneously, such a text is suitable to represent the compromise doctrine, the so-called Monoenergism, or later Monothelitism, which was promoted by emperor Heraclius since the 30s of the seventh century.

Maranci also pointed out that the quote from Aruch (John 14:21), was by John Chrysostom, interpreted as an allusion on the virtue of loyalty and steadfastness. Thus, a quote such as the one found in Aruch, might be, according to Maranci, an appeal to loyalty towards the emperor and the one true doctrine.²⁶⁸ The quotes clearly put an emphasis on doctrinal issues, although, it is uncertain which specific doctrine they convey. It is possible to unpack this; however, it is necessary to take a closer look at the relations between Byzantium and the Armenian Church throughout the seventh century, first.

4.3 Aruch, Mren, Cromi and Talin: Traces of a forgotten union

Attempts for a union between the Byzantine and Armenian Churches

Byzantine emperors saw themselves as the protectors of the orthodox doctrine.²⁶⁹ There were several byzantine emperors throughout the seventh century who tried to renew the union with pre-Chalcedonian churches, simply because a religious pluralism posed a threat to the safety of the empire.²⁷⁰ Emperor Heraclius tried to achieve unity with pre-Chalcedonian churches by imposing the doctrine of Sergius, Patriarch of Constantinople (610–638) called Monenergism or later, Monothelitism. The doctrine promoted that Christ only had one energy (one will) uniting his human and divine nature, and as such, was a compromise between the Chalcedonian and pre-Chalcedonian doctrines.²⁷¹ For a short time,

²⁶⁷ On the characterization of the two doctrines, see Tannous 2014, p. 29. Dialogues between the Eastern and Oriental orthodoxies in the second half of the twentieth century revealed that the two doctrines might be more similar than assumed. Both doctrines are based on arguments presented by Cyril of Alexandria at the council of Ephesus (431) and theologians from both sides acknowledged that the Churches only used different terminology to describe the same concepts. See for example, *Orthodox-unification dialogue* 1981. Considering specifically the Armenian Apostolic Church, Ormanian states that “the differences which divide the Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches, these apply solely to the rejection of the council of Chalcedon, and in the non-recognition of the succeeding Councils. On all other dogmatic questions, the two Churches are in perfect accordance.” In Ormanian (1912) 2018, p. 131.

²⁶⁸ Maranci 2015, p. 90. Homilies of John Chrysostom on the Gospel of John were translated into Armenian in the 5th century.

²⁶⁹ Koutris 2016, p. 85.

²⁷⁰ *Sophronius of Jerusalem* 2009, p. 23.

²⁷¹ Tannous 2014, p. 30.

Heraclius was successful in achieving unity with the Armenian Church through this compromise doctrine. Meetings with Armenians in 622 and in 633 at the synod in Theodosioupilis (Karin) affected the union between the Armenian and Byzantine Churches, and Armenians signed an agreement on common faith. However, right after the death of Emperor Heraclius, Armenians yet again rejected the Monothelite doctrine at the Synod of Dvin (648/9).²⁷²

Emperor Constans II (630–668) followed the steps of Heraclius, and in 648 he issued an edict, called the *Typos*, forbidding argument about the controversial question of the divine and human natures of Christ. This edict, however, did not condemn Monothelitism and Constans's conflict with the Roman Pope Martin – who was known to be objector of Monothelitism – suggests that Heraclius' compromise was probably acceptable to Constans II.²⁷³ Regarding Armenia, Constans II is known as the emperor who brought his troops to Armenia to establish order after the treason of Teodoros Rechtouni; Constans II also forced the Armenian bishops to commune with him, which meant that the emperor demanded the recognition of the imperial dogma.²⁷⁴

After the rule of Constans II, the Byzantines gave up on Monothelitism; however, his successor, Constantine IV (668–685), wanted to put an end to the religious disputes once and for all. Constantine IV summoned the Sixth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople (680) to deal specifically with the issue of Monothelitism. Since by this time, most of the Eastern Churches had been lost to the empire, Constantine had little reason to push forward the compromise. The council condemned Monothelitism, anathematized those who supported it, and instead, returned to the teaching of Chalcedon.²⁷⁵

Constantine's son, Justinian II (685–695), continued in his father's footsteps and confirmed the condemnation of Monothelitism.²⁷⁶ Justinian's policy in the 80s of the seventh century led to an agreement with the Arabs over joint sovereignty of Armenia and Georgia. After that, Justinian II appointed Nerseh Kamrasakan (689-693) as the prince of Armenia.²⁷⁷

²⁷² *Sophronius of Jerusalem* 2009, p. 25.

²⁷³ Gregory 2005, p. 172.

²⁷⁴ Mahe 2012, p. 107.

²⁷⁵ Gregory 2005, p. 174.

²⁷⁶ Gregory 2005, p. 176.

²⁷⁷ Mahe 2012, p. 110.

The emperor's conflict with the Arabs over Cyprus eventually led to the battle of Sebastopolis (691/2), and to the fall of Armenia to the Arabs.²⁷⁸

Scholarship, for a long time, considered Monothelism as an artificial doctrine designed by Byzantine elites and imposed on the broader masses.²⁷⁹ However, Tannous suggests that in some places, Monothelism was more than just a doctrinal compromise. The scholar proved that groups of Christians with Monenergist views existed before Heraclius; and that Monenergist and Monothelite views continued to exist after the Sixth Council (680), especially in Syria. He also proved that the Monothelites understood themselves to be in consonance with the orthodox tradition that preceded them.²⁸⁰ Thus, the doctrine of one will was, in the seventh century, much more important than originally attested by historians; but, since history is written by winners, the voices of the Monothelites vanished.

The impact of Monothelism in Armenia has been poorly studied, and the general interpretation of Armenian history does not speak in its favor. Garsoïan interprets the discussions under Heraclius, the “forced” communion with Constans II, and the treatment of Persarmenia as an enemy country by Justinian II, as intensely unsuccessful attempts of imperial policy to enforce a union.²⁸¹ Until recently, historians considered the ties between Armenia and Byzantium as broken, after the departure of Constans II from Armenia in 660. Following this, the attempt of Justinian II in 680 to compel the Armenian church to accept the doctrine of the Imperial Church, was seen only “as a final, opportunistic initiative after decades of isolation.”²⁸² There is, however, a precious Armenian source studied by Greenwood entitled “Anonymous Chronicles,” which dates into the 680s, and displays Miaphysite perspectives. According to Greenwood, the text proves that Monothelism was much more important in Armenia than previously assumed. Greenwood's conclusions deserve to be quoted at length:

“The Anonymous Chronicle implies a very different context, one of contemporary contact and confessional confrontation. This little-heralded text invites a reconsideration of the whole basis of the relationship between

²⁷⁸*Encyclopedia Britannica* "Justinian II."

²⁷⁹ Hovurun 2008, p. 93.

²⁸⁰ Tannous 2014, pp. 36, 65.

²⁸¹ Garsoïan 1999, p. 395.

²⁸² Garsoïan 1999, pp. 394–397; Greenwood 2008, p. 251.

the churches in the seventh century. Historically the breach between them has been defined exclusively in terms of Chalcedon, with the decisive break occurring at the very start of the century. However, the Anonymous Chronicle itself notes that Catholicos Ezr reached agreement with Heraclius at the Council of Theodosiopolis. Moreover, the six Catholicoi after Komitas, starting with Ezr, were described by Catholicos Yovhannes of Odzun in the second decade of the eighth century as heretics. What if their so-called heresy stemmed not from their response to Chalcedon but rather their enthusiasm for the monoenergist and monothelite theological compromises? Whilst no fewer than twenty-eight extant letters chart the breach with Constantinople between 604 and 608, not a single letter composed by a Catholicos between 628 and 705 survives. Although impossible to prove, it does appear that at some point there has been some judicious filleting of the archives of the Catholicosate. [...]”²⁸³

Greenwood adds that if Monothelitism had proved to be popular in seventh century Armenia it would explain why the doctrine was not repudiated sooner than at the Sixth Ecumenical Council. According to Greenwood, the Imperial Church might have retained the compromise doctrine because it was taken up by Armenian church elites, who the Byzantine empire was determined to keep on their side.²⁸⁴

Visual traces of forgotten union

Images of the standing Christ in Aruch, Mren, and Cromi might support Greenwood’s hypothesis about a prevailing popularity of Monothelitism in Armenia during the majority of the seventh century. It is no coincidence that images of the standing Christ are to be found in Armenian and Georgian churches whose construction is, in some way, connected with Byzantine emperors who are – as attested by Armenian histories – trying to enforce the Armenian church into union with Byzantine orthodoxy. The church of Mren is inscribed with the name of emperor Heraclius; who, as the first emperor who tried to promote the doctrine of Monothelitism in Armenia, was demonstrably successful, although for just over one decade.²⁸⁵ It was recently identified, that the church in Cromi was built by the same emperor, as part of his building campaign in Georgia.²⁸⁶ Both churches – Mren and Cromi – contain the same image of a standing Christ in their apses. Strangely enough, the church of Aruch also contains an image of the standing Christ in its apse. Moreover, the scroll held by

²⁸³ Greenwood 2008, pp. 251–252.

²⁸⁴ Greenwood 2008, pp. 251–252.

²⁸⁵ Maranci 2015; *Sophronius of Jerusalem* 2009, p. 25.

²⁸⁶ Khostaria 2021.

Christ in the apse of Aruch contains a thematically identical quote from the Gospel of John as the scroll in the apse of Cromi; and the quotes are not written in Greek, but instead, in two different national languages – Old Georgian and Ancient Armenian. This fact might suggest that both images were, in the time of their execution, overarched by the same doctrine, which would have been acceptable for both Chalcedonian Georgia, and the pre-Chalcedonian Armenia. The church of Aruch is inscribed with the name of another Byzantine emperor who “enforced” Chalcedonism on the Armenian Church – the emperor Constans II.²⁸⁷ The latest discoveries by Greenwood might prove that the story about Constans II forcing Chalcedonism on Armenians, might be, rather, a story about reestablishment of Monothelitism in Armenia.

I believe that an image of the standing Christ as found in Aruch, Mren and Cromi was invented by the court of emperor Heraclius, to promote the new compromise doctrine – Monothelitism – which was intended to unify the orthodox churches. It was a theophanic image, which was using visual and epigraphic means to convey the Christology of the Monothelite doctrine, by showing Christ in his human form and in an apparently human-like position but in a celestial context. This Christ was pointing at an empty throne, a symbol of the ecumenical councils established at Ephesus, to highlight the fact, that both Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian doctrines are based on the council of Ephesus. The image was probably invented by recycling the ancient iconography of the so-called *Traditio legis*, of which, the original meaning was already forgotten by the beginning of the seventh century. By adding in new elements, the image was reinvented to convey the Monothelite doctrine, and it was promoted together with the doctrine in seventh-century Armenia.

I would like to support this claim with one more piece of evidence. During the fifteenth session of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680), a monk named Polychronius advocated for Monothelitism by telling the congregation about his vision which occurred to him on the seventh hour of the day.²⁸⁸ The monk said: “I saw a terrifying man. His clothes were exceedingly white, and he stood before me saying, ‘He who does not confess one will and theandric energy is not a Christian’.”²⁸⁹ The monk apparently had a vision, in which,

²⁸⁷ Greenwood 2004, p. 86.

²⁸⁸ Tannous 2014, p. 43.

²⁸⁹ *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 2.2.2:676.16–18; Translated by Tannous in Tannous 2014, p. 43. The concept of “theandric energy” was introduced by the first-century bishop of Athens, Dionysius the Areopagite.

God revealed to him what it meant to be a true Christian, and this vision is astonishingly similar to the apsidal images in Aruch, Mren and Cromi. I believe that during his speech, the monk might have been referring to the images of Christ which were invented to represent the Monothelite Christology.

The apsidal image in the Talin cathedral is also a testament of the union between the Armenian and Byzantine Church, but this time, the union was not achieved through the compromise doctrine. The dating of the church into the 80s of the seventh century as well as the attribution of the building to Nerseh Kamsarakan appointed by emperor Justinian II, suggests that the apsidal image in Talin is an explicit reference to the council of Chalcedon. It is also known that Justinian II was extremely pious, and he carried out the construction of many notable buildings and iconographical programs. For example, he also decided to use the portrait of Christ on the Byzantine coins.²⁹⁰ It is thus possible, that the iconographic concept executed in Talin was invented at the Byzantine imperial court. Nevertheless, by the 90s, Byzantium already lost influence over Armenia, and soon after that, the Armenian Church definitively established its anti-Chalcedonian doctrine and Christology. Nowadays, the only traces of a pre-existing union with the Byzantine Church in the seventh century, are a few apsidal images whose meaning was, over the centuries, probably reinterpreted and eventually fully forgotten.

4.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine the iconographical and historical context of four apsidal compositions. Three of them are located in different areas of historical Armenia (Aruch, Mren and Talin) while Cromi is to be found in neighboring Georgia. The iconographical analysis was necessary for the later application of the historical knowledge onto the images. The apsidal compositions in churches of Aruch, Mren, and Cromi contain an image of Christ standing on a jeweled pedestal with a raised right hand and an open scroll. The iconographical analysis dismissed the claim that the image represents an iconography of the so-called *Traditio legis*. Instead, the images were identified as theophanic images

Dionysius' writings were cherished by both chalcedonians and non-chalcedonians, but especially by monothelites. See *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus*, p. 19.

²⁹⁰ Gregory 2005, p. 176.

invented to highlight the divinity of Christ. An image in the conch of the Talin cathedral was identified as a theophanic image representing a godly presence in a non-anthropomorphic image.

The second part of the chapter took a close look at the established iconography to study its concrete doctrinal meaning. An analysis of the “standing Christ” images suggested that the images could be designed in order to be convenient for an orthodox Christological teaching, which put emphasis on united divinity and humanity of Christ. The analysis of the two inscriptions preserved on scrolls held by Christs in Aruch and Cromi, supported such a hypothesis. An image of an open book on a throne as found in the Talin cathedral was interpreted more concretely – as an image of Chalcedonian orthodoxy.

The final section combined all previously established conclusions and applied them on a historical and doctrinal context of seventh century Armenia and Byzantium. As a result, the conchal images in Aruch, Mren, and Cromi were interpreted as conveying the dogma of Monoenergism or Monothelitism. The dogma was a compromise between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christology promoted by the emperor Heraclius since the 30s of the seventh century. This interpretation supports Greenwood’s hypothesis regarding a significant popularity of Monothelitism in seventh-century Armenia, which was so far, very poorly studied.²⁹¹ On the other hand, the conchal image from the Talin cathedral was, in light of historical and doctrinal issues of the seventh century, interpreted as an image of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. In this chapter, the images from several major seventh-century cathedrals of Armenia and Georgia were analyzed as precious historical material, testifying about a long-forgotten union of Armenian and Byzantine Churches.

²⁹¹ Greenwood 2008.

5. APSIDAL COMPOSITIONS IN SEVENTH CENTURY ARMENIA

Iconography of Armenian monumental painting in Late Antiquity was so far very poorly studied. The most valuable contributions in this area can be assigned to Manukyan and Putsko, which both published their articles at the turn of seventies.²⁹² Since then the scholarship concerned itself with iconography only marginally. But the iconography is not the only area of the field which has been neglected. Function, nor dating of the paintings were never put into question, although compositions in Kosh and Karmravor contain iconographic elements which are typically being assigned to following centuries.²⁹³

The Armenian monumental painting was interpreted by majority of scholars quite uniformly. Images in conches were classified either as *Traditio legis*, *Hetoimasia* (both analyzed in previous chapter) or as the Christ in Glory. Those images were then, according to earlier research, placed into the so called “Ascension scheme” and supplemented by other images, such as Two holy martyrs on a horseback.²⁹⁴ Majority of those iconographical concepts was in recent years either entirely overcome or considerably reinterpreted. In this chapter I intend to examine those iconographical concepts and apply the latest knowledge on Armenian monumental painting of seventh century. As a result, I will outline possible meaning and function, and attempt to re-date some of the paintings.

5.1 *Christ in Glory iconography*

The iconography found in conches of Lmbat, Karmravor and Kosh is called in scholarly literature Christ in Glory, Christ in Majesty, *Maiestas Domini* or Liturgical *Maiestas*. In Armenia the iconography contains figure of Christ sitting on a jeweled throne with a matching footstool. The throne is flanked by angelic creatures like cherubim and seraphim, sometimes they’re wings are seed with eyes and sometimes they are accompanied by fiery wheels. Enthroned Christ is placed in a huge almond shape aureole or a mandorla. In all three cases it is impossible to tell whether Christ was bearded or not due to intentional destruction of figures faces (Karmravor) or simply due to bad state of frescoes preservation

²⁹² Manukyan 1978; Putsko 1980.

²⁹³ In the chancel of Kosh there was iconography of a Communion of Apostles. Conchal image in Karmravor contains standing figures of Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist, thus the composition was identified as *Diesis*. More on that later in the text.

²⁹⁴ Durnovo 1979, pp. 139–144; Kotandjyan 2007, p. 138; Hakobyan 2016, pp. 136–137.

in upper part of the conch (Lmbat, Kosh). Details of the images differ slightly but overall composition is almost identical.

The iconography of Christ in Glory was studied already by Grabar as a reference to the Book of Revelation.²⁹⁵ Such reading was repeatedly dismissed by various scholars, because from all the allusions to prophetic visions found in the picture, the ones referring to the Book of Revelations are the least convincing.²⁹⁶ Later Ihm-Belting interpreted the iconography as a Theophanic vision composed of several different biblical texts, among them visions of Ezekiel, Isaiah and John's Revelation.²⁹⁷ However, according to Ihm-Belting the image does not illustrate directly the texts, but rather prayers of the Eucharistic liturgy which refer to the biblical visions. That is why Ihm-Belting called the iconography "Liturgical Maiestas".²⁹⁸ The most recent approach presented by Spieser advocates even simpler solution which is also in accordance with Ihm-Belting liturgical interpretation. According to Spieser the image of Christ in Glory or any other representation of Christ in church's conchal space is supposed to be a theophanic image, which main goal is to evoke Gods presence during celebration of the eucharist.²⁹⁹ It is an image of Christ the God which probably started to be favored around the time of Arian heresy, because it highlights Christs divinity.

The question of origin of the iconography is much less developed. Grabar argued for Palestinian as a place of origin, since Christ in Gory appears in two-zoned compositions on Palestinian ampules in Monza.³⁰⁰ Ihm-Belting argues that the iconography of "Liturgical Maiestas" is a product of Oriental monastic art, since examples of it were so far found only in such monastic environment.³⁰¹ The hypothesis about Eastern, specifically Alexandrian origin is supported also by Iakobini. In his study on Bawit monastery apsidal frescoes, Iakobini identifies the apsidal mosaic in Hosios David in Thessaloniki as a primitive version of Christ in Glory iconography. According to Iakobini, the mosaic contains figures of two

²⁹⁵ Grabar 1946, pp. 199–201.

²⁹⁶ See the recherche in Iakobini 2000, pp. 67–105.

²⁹⁷ Ihm 1960, pp. 42–51.

²⁹⁸ For example: Bawit monastery in Egypt, Latomou monastery in Thesaloniki or in St Dodo monastery in Georgia.

²⁹⁹ Spieser 2015, pp. 317–395.

³⁰⁰ On ampules from Monza see Filipová 2014.

³⁰¹ For example: Bawit monastery in Egypt, Latomou monastery in Thesaloniki or in St Dodo monastery in Georgia.

prophets – Ezekiel and Habakuk. After a careful analysis the scholar concludes that the mosaic is composed of exegesis of Alexandrian fathers on the writings of the two prophets and even the fact that in the legend the mosaic in Thessalonici was revealed to Egyptian monk, might speak for Egyptian origin of the iconography.³⁰² Whether the iconography originated in Palestine or Egypt cannot be resolved at the moment, but its popularity in eastern late antique monastic context is well attested.

The three examples of Christ in Glory iconography from Armenia were all found in supposedly seventh-century Armenian monastic churches. That is why they support Ihm-Belting and Iakobini's hypothesis about use and possibly also invention of the iconography in Eastern monastic context. There is little information on Armenian monasticism in the seventh century. A letter from around 574–577, written by John IV, Patriarch of Jerusalem, to Abas, Catholicos of Albania, turned out to be an important source of information on the matter. John IV writes to Abas to prevent him from adhering to the heresy of the Armenians and explains why he anathematized those Armenians who did not accept Chalcedon and drove them out of Palestine.³⁰³ According to Mahé, those Armenian monks who were driven out of Palestine then returned to Armenia, but instead of great monasteries to which they were accustomed in Jerusalem, they found only small communities of ascetics living in caves or minor hermitages according to Syro-Mesopotamian tradition. Mahé also claims that it was the pre-Chalcedonian monks from Jerusalem who gave rise to vast monastic communities in seventh-century Armenia. Those communities were living under the Rule of St Basil, which was translated into Armenia precisely at that time.³⁰⁴

It would be no surprise if together with the Rule and the anti-Chalcedonian attitude, the monks would also bring their images and visual concepts. At this point a conclusion offers itself that the Christ in Glory iconography in Armenia represents an image of God as understood by pre-Chalcedonian monks returning from Jerusalem at the end of the sixth century. However, the popularity of the Christ in Glory iconography in Chalcedonian sphere would dismiss such claim very quickly.³⁰⁵ It is more likely that the iconography of Christ in

³⁰² Iakobini 2000, p. 182–190.

³⁰³ See French translation of the letter in Garsoïan 1999, pp. 490–501.

³⁰⁴ Mahe 2012, pp. 100–101.

³⁰⁵ For example, in Georgia the iconography was used especially in tenth–eleventh century. See Velmans 1996, pp. 20–26.

Glory was established in Armenian monastic communities (although small ones) already before the homecoming of Jerusalemite monks. The iconography was used across entire Eastern Christian world, which Armenia was undoubtedly a part of. The Armenian monks from Jerusalem probably just reconfirmed the tradition to use this image in conchal space and spread it into new-born monasteries throughout the seventh century. The Christ in Glory iconography is thus not to be seen as an anti-Chalcedonian image, but, on the contrary, as a pre-Chalcedonian and thus conservative image, which was apparently preferred since the fourth century to depict Christ as God in opposition to Arianism.³⁰⁶ Armenian monks had no need to invent new image for their doctrine because as they saw it, their doctrine was in accordance with the orthodox tradition.³⁰⁷ It was the emperor Heraclius and the introduction of Monothelitism in Armenia who caused invention of a new image for conches of Armenian churches, which would better convey the compromise between the two doctrines that he was trying to achieve.³⁰⁸ While Christ in Glory iconography was a conservative image, the image of standing Christ was a re-invented innovation. Such understanding is only confirmed when reading the conchal images in broader context of their surroundings.

5.2 “Ascension scheme” compositions

To fully understand a monumental image, it is necessary to take into consideration its closest surrounding. Especially compositions of images in an apse must be considered as a whole. Apses of Aruch, Mren, Talin, Karmavor, Lmbat, Kosh and Cromi all contain very similar visual compositions. First of all, all of them bear a depiction of Christ the God in their conches, whether in a form of a standing Christ or Christ in Glory. Secondly, chancels of Aruch, Mren, Talin, and Cromi churches contain depictions of apostles. In Aruch there are standing figures of twelve apostles distributed in groups of six on both sides of the three windows. Such composition leaves a space from both sides of the central window free for another image. Unfortunately, the fresco in this part of the chancel disappeared and there is no way to find out if it depicted any other figures. In Mren the situation is slightly different. The group of apostles contains only eight figures which are distributed between the three windows of the chancel. The composition leaves no space for other figures around the central

³⁰⁶ Spieser 2015, p. 233–237, 337–342.

³⁰⁷ Ormanian (1912) 2018, pp. 120–134.

³⁰⁸ See previous chapter *Aruch, Mren, Cromi and Talin: Images of Orthodoxy and Traces of Forgotten Union*.

window. In Cromi the apostles are located from both sides of the single window and above it there is Virgin orant. The chancel of Talin contains twelve apostles distributed between all three apsidal windows, leaving no space for other figures.

Apostles and the Virgin Mary together with an image of Christ in mandorla carried by angelic creatures create a scheme traditionally identified as the Ascension.³⁰⁹ More concretely, so called Oriental or Eastern style of the Ascension iconography, which typically shows Virgin Mary among the apostles in the lower part of an image and Christ (standing in mandorla or sitting on a throne) carried by angelic creatures in the upper part.³¹⁰ The most famous example of Oriental style of the Ascension is represented by the folio 13v from Syrian Gospel Rabbula, an illuminated book decorated in several phases during the 6th century.³¹¹ The scene, however, does not correspond with the Bible. The Ascension as described in The Acts of Apostles 1:6–11 or the Gospel of Luke 24:50–53 does not mention the presence of Virgin Mary and make impossible the presence of apostle Paul.³¹² Dewald suggested that there must have been a different textual source for such an image.³¹³ More suitable source was found by Kateusz, who after reading the so called Dormition Manuscripts decided to reinterpret the scene not as the Ascension of Christ but as the ascension of Mary instead. The text describes, how just before Mary died the twelve apostles (also Paul) returned from their missions and gathered in her house. One book tradition specifically pictures Mary praying with her arms raised surrounded by apostles, before Christ took her into heaven.³¹⁴ Thus, the iconography established as the Ascension was questioned already at the beginning of the twentieth century and continues to be questioned up to nowadays. The exemplary picture of such iconography – the folio from Gospel Rabbula – does not have to represent the Ascension of Christ at all.

In monumental painting the connection to the scene of the Ascension of Christ is even more loose. Among the most famous examples of apsidal compositions identified as the Ascension scheme are apsidal paintings in chapels of the Coptic monastery of Bawit, dated

³⁰⁹ Most recent bibliography on the Ascension iconography in Hnilica 2015; Fernández Lahosa vol. I 2020.

³¹⁰ Dewald 1915, pp. 282–284.

³¹¹ More on Gospell Rabulla in Bernabò 2014; Fernández Lahosa vol. II 2020, pp. 175–184.

³¹² Kateusz 2015, p. 282.

³¹³ Dewald 1915, p. 284.

³¹⁴ Kateusz 2015, p. 283.

between the sixth and the ninth century.³¹⁵ For example, in the chapel n. 17 of excavated Bawit monastery the apsidal composition contains an enthroned Christ in mandorla among angelic creatures in the conch and a Virgin Mary as an orant among fourteen apostles in the chancel.³¹⁶ Grabar interprets such apsidal programs as variations of a Theophanic vision before witnesses, taken directly from pagan mystic cults or imperial iconography.³¹⁷ For Grabar, the Ascension was only a historical subject that gave rise to the use of the abstract type of the Theophany. The two zones are divided between timeless image of a Theophany above and a historical image below, as if the Christ in Glory represents a theophanic vision during *Parousia* which was announced precisely at the moment of the Ascension.³¹⁸ Ihm-Belting argues that the question of deeper inner interpretation of the images' two zones must be clarified. According to Ihm-Belting, apsidal compositions as the one in Bawit chapel n. 17 do not show the act of the Ascension itself, but rather a compilation of events after the Ascension of Christ leading to the establishment of the Church – the Pentecost. In Jerusalemite liturgical calendar the feast of the Ascension was originally connected with the Pentecost, thus the two separate events are in fact just one feast. Moreover, the image serves as legitimization of the Church as an institution, where the presence of Virgin Mary underlines the disputes in the Early Church on divine and human nature of Christ. While Christ ascended into heaven, the Virgin Mary with apostles took on the role of church's pillars on earth and intercessors.³¹⁹

One must agree with Ihm-Belting argumentation and acknowledge that in Bawit there is no element which would allow to interpret the composition as the act of the Ascension of Christ. Firstly, in the chancel there are fourteen figures of apostles and Mary holding a child on her lap.³²⁰ Also, the separation between the two zones is obvious. The Virgin Mary with apostles are frontal and still and there is no communication between the upper and lower part of the image. The two zones are strictly separated by a thick red line and different colors of the background. However, the hypothesis can be pushed even further.

³¹⁵ On Bawit monastery see Ihm 1960, pp. 198–205; Iacobini 2000; Cantone 2008. Most recent contributions come from work in progress of Helena Rochard.

³¹⁶ Cledat 1904, Pl. XLI.

³¹⁷ Grabar 1946, p. 117, 211.

³¹⁸ Ibidem.

³¹⁹ Ihm 1960, pp. 102–108.

³²⁰ The twelve apostles might be joined by two local saints which are by Coptic church understood as the apostles. See Iacobini 2000, p. 96.

The composition in Bawit does not have to represent a concrete scene from the Bible at all. To understand a range of Early Christian images requires to forget the assumption that an image necessarily represents a scene precisely located in space and time. Compositions of “the Ascension scheme”, such as the chapel n. 17 apse are simply invented images compiled of several different biblical and secular, textual and visual sources which depict all the important church figures mentioned during the liturgy of eucharist.³²¹ What is also important is the double zone of the image. Following the logic of Matthews, such division as can be seen also in the apse of chapel n. 17 refers to the opposition between the celestial and the terrestrial world.³²² While the apostles and Virgin orant are represented in terrestrial sphere, Christ's divinity is highlighted by placing him with angelic creatures into the celestial sphere. In short, while I agree with Ihm-Belting that the two-zoned images of so-called Ascension are a representation of the Church, its hierarchy and legitimization, I do not think that they necessarily follow a concrete text from the Bible. They rather show church figures which the believers address during the Trisagion liturgy.

Most scholars identified the iconography of apsidal compositions of Armenian churches as the “Ascension scheme”.³²³ The apse in Cromi was recognized as the same iconography by Lazarev and Skirtladze.³²⁴ Considering the previous analysis of Bawit chapel iconography the opinion that apses of Armenian churches and Cromi contain the Ascension must be reconsidered. The number of apostles does not correspond with any biblical text. While in Aruch and Talin there are twelve standing figures, in Mren there are only eight. The Virgin Mary, although her presence in the traditional Ascension iconography is almost paradoxical, can be demonstratively identified only in Cromi. In all four cases conches are distinctively separated from chancels by a frieze with ornaments. There is thus, I believe, clear division between the celestial and terrestrial world which is in Aruch and Cromi emphasized also by different color of the background.³²⁵

Apsidal compositions in Mren and Talin are supplemented by one more element. Intradoses of both conches are decorated by a chain of medallions with busts of prophets and

³²¹ Such reading for some of the Bawit chapels was proposed by Baumstark, Van der Meer, Der Nersessian, Millet, Wermer, Van Moorsel. For recherche see Iakobini 2000, pp. 67–105.

³²² Matthews 1999, pp. 142–176.

³²³ Durnovo 1957, pp. 8–9; Hakobyan 2016, pp. 137–138; Kotandjyan 2017, pp. 116–117.

³²⁴ Lazarev 1967, p. pp. 90–91; Skhirtladze 1997, p. 173.

³²⁵ In Aruch Christ is situated on greenish background, in Cromi on golden one.

a cross. In Cromi the same chain of medallions was found on the intrados of a central window. In Aruch the fresco in upper part of the conch is damaged, but the presence of medallions cannot be excluded. After accepting minor alterations, it is possible to conclude that in at least four major seventh-century South Caucasian cathedrals there was very likely a decorative concept with an identical visual and conceptual structure. The medallions with busts of prophets arch the conch in a symbolic fashion. They represent the Old Testament and simultaneously a vision of Christ the God in the conch is a compilation of visions and prophecies of subjects depicted in the medallions. Below the conch the apostles and in some cases also Virgin Mary evoke the New Testament.³²⁶ They are pillars of the Church, which are representing intercessors and holy figures. The entire composition thus presents key-figures from the New and Old Testament with the Christ/God. The latter is represented in separated celestial sphere to emphasize his divine nature and his position in the center of the composition highlights his role as the focal point of the universe – the *A* and *Ω*, the beginning and the end.³²⁷

Such visual composition in the apse is not specific to Armenian churches and to Cromi. The same distribution of images and overall iconography can be found in several other churches across Eastern Christian World in the Late Antiquity, like for example in already mentioned Bawit monastery or the sixth-century apse mosaic in St Catherine monastery at Sinai (theophany in form of Transfiguration and medallions with prophets and apostles).³²⁸ Same as iconography of Christ in Glory, this entire composition with apostles in the chancel, prophets in medallions and Christ the God in the conch might be the conservative apsidal concept of the Eastern Churches, although the composition might slightly differ in every individual case.³²⁹ In Armenian churches and Cromi the main thing that changes is the theophanic vision in the conch and, as I was trying to illustrate in previous chapter, it only changes in conches of churches which erection was in some way connected to union seeking Byzantine emperors.

³²⁶ Similar conclusion was presented in Manukyan 1978, p. 174.

³²⁷ The idea that apsidal compositions represent universal order according to Christian philosophy was presented in Matthews 1999, pp. 92–114.

³²⁸ On Sinai see: Forsyth, Weitzman 1973; Andreopoulos 2002. For interpretation of the Transfiguration mosaic as a theophany see Elsner 1995, pp. 99–104.

³²⁹ In the chapel n. 6 of Bawit monastery there are personifications of virtues instead of prophets depicted in medallions on a triumphal arch. See Iakobini 2000, p. 60.

5.3 *Two holy martyrs on a horseback*

One more element unifies the apsidal iconographical concept in several churches in Armenia with Eastern Christian iconographic concepts. In Talin, Lmbat, Karmravor and Mastara the apsidal composition is flanked on both sides by two holy martyrs on a horseback armed with a cross-topped lance. Sometimes the two martyrs are depicted on the eastern wall (Talin, Lmbat) and sometimes they cover the southern and northern walls near the entrance to the church (Mastara, Karmravor). The identity of the two holy martyrs in Armenian churches is in some cases clear. In Lmbat church, the names of the martyrs are inscribed above their heads. They are St Theodore and St George.³³⁰ In the church of Karmravor the horse riders are also identified by inscription, but this time the fresco depicts St George and St Sergios.³³¹ The recently uncovered figure of holy martyr in Mastara is allegedly St George, while the fragment of horse rider in Talin does not allow for any concrete identification.³³² The two holy martyrs on a horseback are often found on Eastern-Christian early medieval fresco compositions. In the ninth-century St Dodo monastery there is depiction of St Theodore and St George identified by an inscription and located on the walls of an aisle.³³³ In the excavated Bawit monastery the two holy riders are to be found in several places. On the western wall of the chapel n. 17 there is St Sission depicted on a horseback slaying a female demon identified as Lilith, together with St Phibamon. Holy martyrs on a horseback are depicted also on pendentives of the chapel n. 17 and chapel n. 27, as well on the northern wall of chapel n. 26. The frescoes are dated into the sixth century.³³⁴ Depiction of St Theodore and St George on horseback is to be found also in Capadoccia. For example, in the seventh-century rock-cut church Mavrucan no. 3 dedicated to St George, the two martyrs are represented on horseback, attacking two serpents twisted around a tree.³³⁵

St Theodore and St Sergios have special place in Armenian literary tradition. The Armenian Epic History of Pawstos dated around 470 describes how the two martyrs killed

³³⁰ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 78.

³³¹ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 168. Later in the text I argue that the fresco from Karmravor was executed after the eleventh century. This fact does not change the meaning of the Two Holy Martyrs in Karmravor and it is thus justified to speak about them here.

³³² Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 186.

³³³ For latest bibliography on St Dodo monastery see: Buchukuri 2001; Skhirtladze 2008; Chikhladze 2017.

³³⁴ Cledat 1904, Pl. XXXIX, LIII–LVI, LXXXVIII.

³³⁵ Thierry 1972, p. 258–263.

the Arian emperor Valens.³³⁶ In the story the two saints were persuaded by St Thekla to eliminate the Arian persecutor in order to protect the true Christians. It would be perfectly reasonable to find depiction of the two saints in seventh century Armenian churches, whether as protectors of true Christians from heretics or from Arabs. However, in none of the churches that preserved the fresco of the two martyrs it is possible to demonstrably find St Sergios and St Theodore together. Moreover, Walter points out that there is no evidence that the story was ever translated into iconography.³³⁷ To ascribe dogmatic meaning to the two protectors would be rather unfounded. The function of the two saints is probably more general, apotropaic.

Depiction of St Sergios appears between 550-650 in wide context, as a protector of tax collectors, traders and pilgrims.³³⁸ The cult of St Sergios originated in Syria, where in Rusafa (Sergiopolis) a first martyrion was established around 430 and an impressive shrine was built at the beginning of the sixth century.³³⁹ The shrine was visited by pilgrims from East and West even despite the presence and occasional attacks of Arabs and later Ottomans.³⁴⁰ However, shrines of St Sergios from the sixth century are attested not only in Syria, but across the Eastern Christian world, for example in Gaza (527–550) and Constantinople (527–536).³⁴¹ The image of St Sergios on a horseback might also originate from Rusafa, since archeologists discovered there a stone mould for making so called eulogies – a small amulet-like objects for pilgrims to be taken away from the sanctuary. The mould depicted St Sergios on a horseback accompanied by his legend, so the objects that the mould produced might spread the iconography of the saint across the Christian world.³⁴² There is only few traces of the veneration of St Sergios in the seventh century Armenia. A small seventh-century cruciform church in Bdjni is dedicated to St Sarkis (Sergios), unfortunately, the church was never properly studied, so the dedication also remains

³³⁶ P'awstos Buzand's *History of the Armenians*, book IV chapter 10. The name of the emperor does not correspond with historical facts.

³³⁷ Walter (2003) 2016, p. 54.

³³⁸ Key Fowden 1999, pp. 35–39; Grotowski 2010, p. 81. Specifically on St Sergios see Key Fowden 1999; Walter 2016, pp. 146–162.

³³⁹ For more on St Sergios shrine in Rusafa see Key Fowden 1999, chapter 3. There are also some fifth-century shrines dedicated to St Sergios in Salamina (430/431) and Edessa (435/437). See Walter 2016, p. 151.

³⁴⁰ Walter (2003) 2016, p. 151.

³⁴¹ Walter (2003) 2016, p. 152. For Gaza see Maraval 1996, p. 304 and for Constantinople see Janin 1969, pp. 451–454; Maraval 1996, p. 408.

³⁴² Poidebart, Mouterde 1946, p. 116. See also Key Fowden 1999, pp. 29–44.

uncertain.³⁴³ In Armenia the cult of St Sergios took on a local form in the twelve century, when a *Passio* of St Sarkis (Sergios) the General and his son Martyros was spread throughout the region. The legend originates from St Nersēs Šnorhali (1102–1173), who was allegedly given the Armenian translation from Syrian monks. Later redactions of the legend add that body of St Sarkis was transferred to Armenian monastery of Uši (thirteenth to fifteenth century) where many miracles were performed.³⁴⁴

The cult of St Theodore, on the other hand, was deeply rooted in Byzantine empire. Sometime around the ninth century the unique cult of St Theodore split in two separate saints – St Theodore Tiron (the Recruit) and St Theodore Stratelates (the General).³⁴⁵ Together with St Demtrius, St Procopius, St Mercurius and St George, the two St Theodores represented headquarters of Byzantine pantheon of saints, with special protective or apotropaic powers. Saint Gregory of Nazien in his Sermon on St Theodore describes the saint as the protector against demons, patron of travelers, curer of diseases and helper to the poor. The saint is also supposed to intercede before the Lord and influence human behavior for the better.³⁴⁶ Only later he was believed to be intervening in battles on behalf of the Byzantine army.³⁴⁷ The cult originates in Euchaïta, a Cappadocian village which soon after the construction of St Theodore shrine in the fourth century started to flourish as a popular pilgrimage site and maintained that position until the second half of the eleventh century.³⁴⁸ The cult spread and was well established in Syria, Palestine, Asia Minor, Constantinople and Italy. Also, in seventh-century Armenia there might have been churches dedicated to St Theodore, such as the today ruined church of Bagaran (624–631).³⁴⁹

In case of St George the information about the origin and spreading of the cult is much poorer. Hagiographers recognized that most of what is written in early Passions of St George is historically implausible. The studies of no more than thirty Byzantines sources concerned with life, passion, and miracles of St George only gave this historically valuable information: he was a young aristocratic officer from Cappadocia who died by cruel

³⁴³ On St Sarkis in Bdjni see Kazaryan vol. III 2012, p. 631–636.

³⁴⁴ Cowe 2011, pp. 312–313.

³⁴⁵ Haldon 2018, p. 214.

³⁴⁶ Nyssen, *In Praise of Blessed Theodore*.

³⁴⁷ Walter (2003) 2016, p. 41. The classification of those saints as *état-major* comes from Delehaye 1909.

³⁴⁸ On the shrine and city of Euchaïta see Haldon 2018, pp. 210–254.

³⁴⁹ The dedication of the Bagaran church to St Theodore is not mentioned in dedicatory inscription and as such remains uncertain. More on Bagaran in Kazaryan vol. I 2012, pp. 357–372.

torture.³⁵⁰ The sanctuary of George in Lydda (Palestine) built at the end of the fourth century is generally considered as original martyrion of the saint, although the evidence for that is also questioned.³⁵¹ Nevertheless, the cult of St George spread rapidly and already in the sixth century the saint was venerated across the entire Eastern Christian world. It was the emperor Heraclius who transferred the relic of St George to Constantinople, an act which might either contribute to growing popularity of the saint in the seventh century Armenia, or, on the other hand, might be a response to the massive popularity of the saint in Eastern Christian world.³⁵² Considering the Ancient Roman tradition to comprise deities of conquered lands into the Pantheon, I believe the latter is much more probable. Number of seventh century Armenian churches is dedicated to St George, such as Sverdlov and Garnaovit, although the date of their dedication remains obscure.³⁵³

Images of two holy martyrs on horseback were studied in Georgian context by Velmans. The scholar assigns the origin of the iconography to Achaemenid and Sassanid Persia, where two horse riders in facing position were to be found on monumental façade compositions up to the seventh century.³⁵⁴ Velmans adds that such images are deeply rooted in visual culture of Eastern world, presenting, for example, the fourth-to-sixth-century comb of Antinoe found in Egypt, while in Greco-Roman world such compositions are nowhere to be found.³⁵⁵ The two holy martyrs on a horseback are thus another element which links Armenian and Georgian monumental painting to the Eastern visual tradition, not only in terms of form but also in content. The cult of St Theodore, Ste George and St Sergios all originate in Palestine from where they spread into Eastern Roman empire and beyond. The portraits of warrior saints in Armenian and Georgian churches might be one of the original elements of Syro-Palestinian iconography, which was only later translated into visual culture of all the empire. Their position in Armenian churches on both sides of the apse suggests, that they acted as a part of heavenly guard, protectors of the Church with apotropaic powers as well as intercessors for humankind in front of the Lord. In the seventh century the presence

³⁵⁰ Walter (2003) 2016, pp. 111–112.

³⁵¹ Maraval 1996; Walter (2003) 2016, p. 112.

³⁵² Walter (2003) 2016, pp.

³⁵³ On Sverdlov St George church see Kazaryan vol. IV 2012, pp.146–155. On Garnaovit see Kazaryan vol. III 2012, pp. 418–442.

³⁵⁴ Velmans 1996, pp. 113–118. See also Iamanidze 2019, pp. 101–102.

³⁵⁵ Myslivec 1933, p. 309, fig. V. The comb is located in Coptic Museum in Cairo, and it shows the martyr on a horseback in a wreath carried by two angels.

of the two guardians might be needed especially against heretics and Arabs, however, their function is in a broader sense apotropaic.

5.4 Karmravor and Kosh – question of dating

The seventh century dating of iconography analyzed so far was generally accepted among scholars. However, this is not the case with churches of Kosh and Karmravor. Those seventh century Armenian churches contain on their walls iconography which, is usually ascribed to later periods. Churches of Kosh and Karmravor contain in their apses not only the image of Christ in Glory, but in Karmravor there is also *Deesis* and in Kosh the Communion of Apostles. Images with such iconography were never before dated into the seventh century. That would allow to re-date the two frescoes into later periods, and I do not condemn such conclusion. However, I would like to approach the problem as an intellectual exercise and examine the possibility that at least the fresco in Kosh might really originate in the seventh century. Although there is no convincing evidence supporting the seventh century dating, it is also impossible to entirely reject it. I believe that such approach might help opening new possibilities for studies of Armenian monumental painting.

Communion of Apostles in Kosh

In the conch of Kosh church there used to be a depiction of Christ in Glory iconography. In its chancel, Durnovo noticed an image of so-called Communion of Apostles. The scholar dated the fresco into the seventh century, although she did not support her claim by any arguments. Kotandjyan repeated Durnovo's dating, but he as well avoided any argumentation to support such claim.³⁵⁶ The same can be said about latest study of Zarian and Lamoureux.³⁵⁷ Today the image is damaged and Durnovo's observations cannot be confirmed. So far, the oldest examples of Communion of Apostles iconography in monumental painting were found in side chapels of tenth century churches in Cappadocia and Greece.³⁵⁸ Since the eleventh century the iconography is to be found all over the

³⁵⁶ Kotandjyan 1971, pp. 50–51; Kotandjyan 2017, p. 93.

³⁵⁷ Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 216–217.

³⁵⁸ For example, the church of the Nativity near Sangri on Naxos in Greece, and Kılıçlar Kilisesi in Göreme, Cappadocia. See Marinis 2021, p. 1.

Byzantine sphere in chancels of churches.³⁵⁹ Among the most representative examples belong the mosaic from *hagia Sophia* in Kiev (1018), and frescoes from the church of Saint Panteleimon (1164) and *Hagia Sophia* in Ohrid (eleventh century), both located today in Republic of North Macedonia.³⁶⁰ There are older representations of the Communion of Apostles depicted on portable objects, such as the silver liturgical vessels from Syria, so-called *Riha* paten dated between 565–578 and the *Stuma* paten dated into 577/578, or a folio from so-called *Rossano Gospels* dated into the late the sixth century.³⁶¹ Some scholars even hypothesize that those depictions copy older prototypes from monumental painting, which disappeared throughout the centuries.³⁶² For example, Varalis assumes that one of the prototypes might be the chapel of the Last Supper on Mount Sion.³⁶³ The Armenian pilgrim Movses Dasxuranci visited the basilica of Holy Sion in the early seventh century and in the chapel attached to the south side of the basilica he saw an image of the Last Supper. Dasxuranci later wrote:

On the right side of the church is the upper room of the Sacrament and a wooden cupola on which is painted the Saviour's Last Supper. On its altar, the Sacrifice is offered in the upper storey of Sion (...).³⁶⁴

Varalis suggests that the image of the Last supper that the pilgrim saw was an image that we today call the Communion of the Apostles. The Communion of Apostles is depicted also in the south church of the *Bawit* monastery, which paintings are dated into the seventh/eighth century, although not securely.³⁶⁵ It cannot be excluded that the fresco from *Kosh* represents another example of the same iconography in the seventh century, maybe even painted according to the one on Mount Sion.

The iconography has been interpreted mostly as an allusion to the Last Supper with direct connection to the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist.³⁶⁶ Gerstel even argues that

³⁵⁹ Jolivet-Lévy 2009, p. 162.

³⁶⁰ For *Narezi* church see Sinkević 2000. For Ohrid see Grabar 1965; Epstein 1980. For *Hagia Sofia* in Kiev see Nikitenko 2018.

³⁶¹ On *Rossano Gospels* see Sevrugian 1990, Speciale 2019, pp. 181–191 with reference to older literature. On *Riha* paten and *Stuma* paten see Fourlas 2021 with reference to older literature.

³⁶² See for example Loerke 1961 and Loerke 1975.

³⁶³ The hypothesis is presented in Varalis 2014.

³⁶⁴ Wilkinson 2002, p. 165; Fourlas 2021, p. 1139.

³⁶⁵ Van Loon 2004, pp. 1378–1380; Fourlas 2021, p. 1141.

³⁶⁶ Walter 1982, p. 185; Jolivet-Lévy 2009, p. 163; Marinis 2021, p. 3.

the scene serves as an actual visual model for the ritual of communion.³⁶⁷ Jolivet-Levy agrees with the hypothesis, but also reads the scene in the light of liturgical commentaries, and sees in the figure of Christ the Highest Priest in eternity according to the Order of Melchizedek.³⁶⁸ In the most recent contribution, Marins broadens the interpretation beyond its liturgical meaning. The scholar decided to study the scene according to its earliest representations in Gospels rather than in context of its function in monumental painting. According to Marinis, the iconography depicts a historical scene, which represents the divine origin of the eucharistic ritual and as such conveys an ideology or a doctrine.³⁶⁹ That is also the reason, according to Marins, why Christ in the iconography does not wear his already typical *chiton* and *himation*, but the ecclesiastical clothing; although not the clothing of a priest or a bishop as most scholars assumed, but rather the one of patriarch containing the *sakkos*. According to the twelfth century canonist Theodore Balsamon, only the patriarch can be associated with Christ, and he is distinguished from bishops by his clothing.³⁷⁰ Thus, Christ in the iconography of Communion wearing the *sakkos* can only be associated with the patriarch of Constantinople. This is especially true during the late Middle Ages when patriarch of Constantinople claimed universal authority.³⁷¹

It is no coincidence that the Communion of Apostles Iconography was established in the monumental painting in the eleventh century. During that time the disputes between Latins and Byzantines on the very subject of eucharistic bread were causing a rupture in Christian church. While Romans used unleavened bread during the liturgy, Byzantines only used the leavened one. This so-called dispute over *azyma* was one of the official reasons for the justification of the so-called Great Schism of the Church in 1054.³⁷² If the hypothesis of Marins is correct, then the image of Communion of Apostles represented the right way how the rite of eucharist was believed to be performed by the Christ himself. Such image thus conveyed doctrinal and ideological ideas of then Byzantine Church.

Concerning the image which used to be depicted in the chancel of Kosh church, the discussion on its meaning can, at this point, only be hypothetical. Since the existence of the

³⁶⁷ Gerstel 1999, p. 56–57.

³⁶⁸ Jolivet-Lévy 2009, p. 163.

³⁶⁹ Marinis 2021, p. 9.

³⁷⁰ Woodfin 2012, pp. 25–28; Marinis 2021, pp. 15–16.

³⁷¹ Marinis 2021, p. 14–19.

³⁷² Grabar 1965; Epstein 1980; Lidov 1998; Marinis 2021, p. 9.

image was recorded by Durnovo only in written form, its precise form nor dating cannot be reconfirmed. However, if Durnovo was correct, the Communion of Apostles in Kosh would be the oldest known example of the iconography in monumental painting. Unfortunately, the details of the image such as Christ clothing are unknown. Durnovo only described the image as two figures of Christ being approached by two groups of six apostles. While one of the Christs was holding a bowl with bread, the other one was holding an open scroll with an unknown inscription.³⁷³

Such version of Communion of Apostles is, as far as I know, a unique example of the iconography. But before establishing a new version of the Communion iconography, one must remember to be careful with Durnovo's observations. The scholar only described the fresco in a state she saw it in – under the layer of soot and badly damaged. It is quite possible that what Durnovo saw as a scroll was actually a wail covering Christs hands, as for example on the fresco showing the Communion of Apostles in Kobayr, Armenia (thirteenth century).³⁷⁴ It would not be the first time that Durnovo's observations would be dismissed after the fresco's cleaning.³⁷⁵ Unfortunately, such option in Kosh is no longer possible, since the painting entirely disappeared. Durnovo's claim, thus, cannot be confirmed nor dismissed anymore.³⁷⁶ For that reason, let's assume that Durnovo was correct; the fresco in Kosh was executed in the seventh century and one of Christs was truly holding a scroll with an inscription.

In the seventh century, the Armenian and the "Byzantine" Churches found themselves in a very similar situation as the Byzantine and Roman churches in the eleventh century. Since Armenians rejected the Council of Chalcedon, the main difference between the two churches laid in the way they performed the Holy Communion. Armenians, same as later Romans, stand their ground and only used unleavened bread for the Eucharist. The Byzantines, on the other hand, insisted on using the leavened bread.³⁷⁷ The difference in Communion was (and still is) of immense importance for both, Armenians, and

³⁷³ Durnovo 1979, p. 142.

³⁷⁴ On Kobayr see Durnovo 1979, p. 152; Drampyan 1979.

³⁷⁵ For example, in Talin Durnovo interpreted the conchal image as Christ in Glory. Only after the cleaning performed by Kotandjyan was the fresco rightly recognized as a throne with an open book. See Kotandjyan 2017, pp. 97–99.

³⁷⁶ The disappearance of the fresco was recently confirmed after an attempt for a restoration. See Zarian, Lamoureux 2019, p. 216–217.

³⁷⁷ Ormanian (1912) 2018, p. 139.

Byzantines.³⁷⁸ It was the refusal to commune with Justinian II in Haghia Sofia which confirmed the Armenian rejection of Chalcedon, and number of Armenian histories describe the attempts of Byzantine emperors for union as emperors forcing Armenians to commune with them.³⁷⁹ The Communion of Apostles in Kosh could be expressing Armenian views on the matter, especially if one of the two Christs was holding an open scroll with an inscription. As I argued in previous chapter, Christ holding an open scroll is passing to the viewers a dogmatic message. Such image would visually and maybe also in writing confirm the righteousness of Armenian form of Communion. The fresco would represent the historic event of the rite's establishment and alongside serve as a justification of Armenian dogma.

Such explanation of the Communion of the Apostles iconography in the seventh century is, however, not supported by Varalis and Furlas. The scholars studied the early representations of the iconography and arrived at contradictory conclusion. According to Varalis and Furlas, the twofold depiction of Christ on Riha and Stuma patens represents the two natures of Christ and thus serves as a visual representation of Chalcedonian dogma.³⁸⁰ If their hypothesis is correct the image in Kosh would also represent the Chalcedonian Christology, which is, of course, also an option, especially if the fresco was executed in later period. Since there is no evidence that the fresco can be truly dated into the seventh century, the logical solution is to re-date it. In Armenia, the Communion of Apostles can be found in chancels of thirteenth century churches of Kobayr and Akhtala.³⁸¹ In Akhtala, the apsidal composition is very similar to Kosh. There is enthroned Christ in the conch (although without angelic creatures) and in the chancel in two rows the Communion of Apostles and Church fathers. The Church fathers are to be found on the same place also in Kobayr. When Kotandjyan examined the church of Kosh, he noticed other standing figures under the place, where Communion of Apostles was supposed to be. It is possible, that those figures represented the Church fathers, same as in Akhtala and Kobayr. Thus, the iconographical scheme in Kosh share many similarities with two thirteenth century Armenian monumental painting compositions, which allow to redate the fresco in Kosh around the same period.

³⁷⁸ For theological explanation of Armenian rite of the Communion see Arzoumanian 2007, pp. 52–56, esp. pp. 55–56. On the history of Armenian eucharistic rite see Findikian 2009/2010.

³⁷⁹ Mahé 2012, p. 100.

³⁸⁰ Varalis 2004, p. 50; Furlas 2021, p. 1144–1152.

³⁸¹ On Kobayr see Durnovo 1979, p. 152; Drampyan 1979. On Akhtala see Lidov 1991; Bulia, Janjalia 2016.

Unfortunately, at this point nothing can be said with certainty, only that the above-mentioned hypothesis should be considered with future studies of Armenian monumental painting.

Deesis in Karmravor

In the church of Karmravor, the image in the conch is composed of Christ in Glory among angelic creatures and standing figures of Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. The three figures together create a composition of so-called *Deesis*, which same as *Traditio legis* or *Hetoimasia* became since the nineteenth century established iconographical terms, often used by art historians without critical evaluation.

The iconographic theme of the *Deesis* was throughout the twentieth century reconsidered only few times.³⁸² Original interpretation of *Deesis* theme is derived from the word itself, since the Greek term δέομαι (to plead), was used to describe petitions presented to the Byzantine emperors.³⁸³ That is why at first the trio of Christ, Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist used to be interpreted as a visualization of the Intercession Prayer of the Byzantine liturgy.³⁸⁴ The image was understood as illustrating the holy figures hierarchy of the Christian Cosmos, which are necessary for human salvation due to their powers as intercessors. The *Deesis* unites the three most important figures of Christian hierarchy since the Virgin Mary acts as the main instrument of Incarnation and John the Baptist as the forerunner of Christ.

A slightly different interpretation presents *Deesis* as a prayer of intercession, but in an eschatological context. Some scholars went that far as to interpret the scene only as one episode of the Last Judgement.³⁸⁵ On the other hand, Walter reads the presence of Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist as principal witnesses of Christ's divinity. The composition, according to Walter, stresses out the ecclesiastical hierarchy and divine nature of the Logos.³⁸⁶ Finally, the study of Cutler significantly broadened the definition of the *Deesis*. According to the scholar, the *Deesis* was understood by Byzantines in the twelfth century as a prayer of intercession and the number of figures in the composition nor their status were not all that important. *Deesis* was simply formed by figures of chosen saints, donors or angels

³⁸² For recherche on *Deesis* iconography see Lešák 2016, pp. 54–61.

³⁸³ Gilsdorf 2012, p. 134.

³⁸⁴ See for example Mouriki 1968.

³⁸⁵ Such interpretation was presented, for example, by Kondakov 1892, p. 274; Fournée 1964, p. 104.

³⁸⁶ Walter 1968; Walter 1970.

in the pose of adoration, interceding in front of the Lord. The precise meaning differs in every individual case.³⁸⁷ In recent years scholars returned to the eschatological reading of the *Deesis* composition, although an individual approach is being preferred in terms of iconography's interpretation.³⁸⁸ Thus, if the composition is located in a funerary chapel, the eschatological meaning is almost self-evident.

But the case is different when the *Deesis* is depicted in an apse of a church and finds itself as the main focus of not only funerary but also liturgical and eucharistic prayers. Such is the case of Armenian, Georgian, Svanetian and Cappadocian churches which, according to Velmans, were among the places of origin of *Deesis* iconography, since the scholar considers the iconography as originally Oriental.³⁸⁹ Velmans studied the *Deesis* in Georgian and Svanetian churches and concluded, that the iconography truly illustrates the intercessory prayer, but simultaneously answers the eschatological anxieties of the faithful.³⁹⁰

In case of Karmravor church, the composition is no different from the Holy Archangels church in Zemo Krikhi in Georgia (second half of the eleventh century).³⁹¹ Both churches contain in their apse a composition which was called by Velmans the *Deesis-vision*. The image combines the prophetic vision (Christ in Glory among cherubs or seraphs) with standing figures of Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. Moreover, chancels of both churches bear depictions of Church fathers, which makes the apsidal composition of both churches identical. Similar iconography can be found also in the apse of Adishi church of Archangels, Svaneti (twelfth-to-thirteenth century)³⁹², or the thirteenth century layer of murals in the apse in Lamaria church in Ushguli, where the composition of *Deesis-vision* is broadened by two archangels.³⁹³ In both cases, the chancel contains images of apostles.

Based on previously analyzed iconographical similarities, and on non-existent evidence of the seventh century dating, I believe that the fresco in Karmravor church was very likely executed after the eleventh century. The Karmravor church maintained the

³⁸⁷ Cutler 1987, pp. 153–154.

³⁸⁸ See for example Foletti, Giesser 2016.

³⁸⁹ Velmans 1996, p. 32.

³⁹⁰ Ibidem.

³⁹¹ For latest bibliography on Zemo Krikhi see: Constantinides (1993–1994) 2007; Quenia 2004. For complete recherche see online catalogue of Georgian monumental art: <http://arthistory.tsu.ge/murals/painting/zemo-krikhi-murals-of-church-of-the-holy-archangels-second-layer/> [Last available 08.12.2022]

³⁹² See Q'enia 2010, pp. 40–47.

³⁹³ See Q'enia 2010, pp. 22–27.

conservative pre-Chalcedonian apsidal composition found already in Bawit or Lmbat, it even preserved the two holy martyrs on a horseback, but by adding the figures of Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist, and by replacing the apostles with church fathers, the image was adjusted to new liturgical needs of the eleventh century.

5.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine apsidal compositions of allegedly seventh century Armenian churches in order to deduce the meaning and function of their iconography. Except from iconography identified as *Traditio legis* and *Hetoimasia*, which were analyzed in previous chapter, the conches of Armenian seventh-century churches contain also images called Christ in Glory. The image of enthroned Christ flanked by two angelic creatures was by scholars interpreted as composition of several prophetic visions, mostly those of Ezekiel, Isaiah and Habakkuk, and it is understood as a theophanic vision. The image represents the main focus of liturgical and eucharistic prayers, originating in Eastern monastic environment. It is a pre-Chalcedonian image, which puts emphasis on Christ's divinity. It is possible that the image was brought to Armenia by monks from Jerusalem, but its use in Armenia before the sixth/seventh century cannot be excluded.

Such theophanic image, whether it was Christ in Glory, standing Christ or an empty throne, was then placed into a wider composition with apostles and prophets. Earlier scholarship saw the composition as an Ascension scheme, but such interpretation was dismissed already by Matthews.³⁹⁴ The scholar re-interpreted apsidal compositions of Late Antique churches as representation of church hierarchy and world order according to Christian philosophy. Thus, a vision of God occupies the main focal point (the conch) and other important figures, such as apostles, prophets and martyrs revolve around it in hierarchical order, symbolizing the Old and New Testament. They also play roles of divine intercessors, whom prayers are being addressed. Such order in apsidal compositions was identified also in other Early Medieval churches of Eastern Christian world.

The two holy martyrs on a horseback must have been among the most important intercessory figures in Armenian sphere. They appear in major cathedrals as well as small monastic churches flanking the apse or the entrance to the church. Whether it was St

³⁹⁴ Matthews 1999, pp. 142–176.

Theodore, St Sergios or St George, all of them were still in the seventh century among the most popular saints, whose cults spread especially in the Eastern Christian world. They played the role of intercessors and protectors and their cults in late Antique Armenia are attested not only in monumental painting, but also in literature and possibly also in church dedications.

Finally, paintings in churches of Kosh and Karmravor was dated into the seventh century although there are no arguments for such dating. The churches contain iconography of Communion of Apostles (Kosh) and Deesis (Karmravor), which are in such iconographic context usually dated no later than the eleventh century. In case of Kosh church there is a hypothetical chance that the Communion of Apostles is the oldest example of such iconography recorded so far. If that is the case, then the fresco might bear witness to the dogmatic dispute between Armenian and Byzantine Churches after the Armenian rejection of Chalcedon. However, the fresco is not visible anymore and Durnovo's observations of the damaged and uncleaned image cannot be confirmed anymore. At the moment it is more logical to re-date both frescoes into later periods, after the eleventh century.

6. FINAL CONCLUSION

The political situation in Armenia throughout the twentieth century and up to these days caused that a question of medieval art became a question of national importance. The Armenian genocide, the birth and quick ending of the First Armenian Republic, the Soviet era and still lasting war about the area of Artsakh following the fall of Soviet Union – all those events left a permanent trace on studies of Armenian art. Discussions about origins of Armenian art raise passions not only among scholars, but among entire Armenian population. With such wild public interest, Armenia might seem like a promised land for any art historian who knows, how difficult it is to provoke interest of non-academic public in his/her work. But such situation has its downfalls. Armenian art became a delicate topic and its politization in some cases prevents it from being studied properly. Any academic hypothesis can become an argument for some of the sides involved, to claim the origin of artworks, and together with them of the land and its history, for itself.

Such situation places an enormous amount of responsibility on shoulders of scholars dealing with the topic, and it subsequently makes their writing a political manifesto. I truly wanted to avoid such implications and approach the topic as a disinterested outsider, but I am afraid that no matter what conclusions I raise, they will always be in favor of some of the sides involved. Thereby I would like to remind, that all my conclusions should be considered as an intellectual and academic exercise. Although I am convinced about their correctness, they represent an academic hypothesis, which aim is to open new possibilities for further research. The aim of this thesis is not to decide about questions of national claims on medieval painting. On the other hand, I consider such questions irrelevant for studies of seventh century visual culture. If there are attempts in the text to trace the origin of certain iconography, they are not there to raise such claims, but to deduce the meaning of the image for a contemporary viewer.

In this respect, the chapter called “Images of Orthodoxy” might cause the most outrage. In this chapter I have interpreted the image of standing Christ located in the conch of Aruch, Mren and Cromi as a product of Byzantine imperial politics in the seventh century on the territory of Armenia and Georgia. I believe that the image of Christ, standing on a jeweled pedestal with right hand raised and holding an open scroll in his left hand, is an image invented on the court of the emperor Heraclius (610–641) to promote the doctrine of

Monothelitism on pre-Chalcedonian churches. The image is not entirely new. It is a Theophanic vision used already in the fourth century to highlight the divinity of Christ. By adding new elements, such as the inscription from the gospel of John or the image of an empty throne above the head of Christ, the image was re-invented to serve new purpose. The iconography functions as a pictorial spolia, which is supposed to refer to the good old times of union.

The image of standing Christ is much more suitable to represent the Monothelite doctrine than an image of an enthroned Christ because it is not so explicitly divine. Standing figure is more fit to depict Christ as human and divine natures united. That the image appears in Mren and Cromi can be explained by participation of the emperor Heraclius on erection of the churches, which is in case of Mren attested also in its dedicatory inscription. In case of Aruch, the dedicatory inscription contains the name of emperor Constans II. According to Greenwood, the Monothelitism in Armenia might have been very important, and the emperor Constans was probably among the promoters of the doctrine, trying to maintain the relationships with Oriental churches established by Heraclius. In light of this hypothesis, the standing Christ iconography in the conch of Aruch can be understood same as images in Mren and Cromi – as an image of unity between the Byzantine and Armenian churches.

Likewise, the image of an enthroned open book in Talin was also interpreted in light of doctrinal disputes in seventh century Armenia. The image represents certain type of Theophany – an image originating at the ecumenical council in Ephesus (431), which continued to be used after that in Chalcedon (451). Such image in the conch of Talin refers to the council of Chalcedon because the donor of the cathedral, Nerseh Kamsarakan, accepted the Chalcedonian creed after being appointed as prince of Armenia by the emperor Justinian II (685–695).

Such historical and doctrinal reading of standing Christ and open enthroned book images in seventh century Armenia (and Cromi) does not mean that the paintings in Aruch, Mren, Cromi or Talin must be of Byzantine origin. In the following chapter “Apsidal Compositions in Seventh Century Armenia” I argue that although the conchal iconography was probably invented on Byzantine imperial court, the setting of the image is entirely “Eastern/Oriental”. The theophanic images in the conch are accompanied by standing figures of apostles in the chancel and medallions with prophets on the intrados. Such setting

identifies the composition as so called “Ascension scheme”, which, nevertheless, has most probably nothing to do with the scene of the Ascension of Christ. Those apsidal compositions represent church hierarchy and heavenly order according to Christian philosophy and their function is entirely liturgical. The composition depicts key figures addressed during the liturgy of word and eucharist, and the most important protectors and intercessors, such as the holy martyrs on a horseback.

In Lmbat, Kosh and Karmravor the theophany in the conch is represented by an image of enthroned Christ flanked by angelic creatures, called Christ in Glory. The iconography of Christ in Glory is a compilation of prophetic visions and most probably originates in Eastern monastic context, which Armenia is undoubtedly a part of. The images might have been brought to Armenia by Jerusalemite monks at the end of the sixth century, or they might be a part of the original visual culture of the first Armenian monasteries. One way or another, the image has a pre-Chalcedonian origin, and it is not in opposition with other theophanic images to be found in seventh century Armenia. While the standing Christ and an open book in that time and space bear explicitly political message, the Christ in Glory is, on the other hand, just a conservative image of Christ the God.

Finally, I considered it unavoidable to address the question of quite unreliable seventh century dating of some of the compositions. Especially the paintings in Kosh and Karmravor contain iconography, which is in form of monumental painting dated solely after the eleventh century. Since there are no credible arguments speaking for seventh century dating, I suggested to re-date the compositions into later medieval period, meaning after the eleventh century.

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