

Christina Maranci
Aural Architecture Seminar, Stanford University
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**The Great Outdoors:
Liturgical Encounters with the Early Medieval Armenian Church**

Abstract:

This essay considers the possible ritual functions of the early medieval Armenian church exterior, focusing on monuments with epigraphy and sculpture. Drawing from a set of recently-studied early liturgical sources, I consider the relationship between hymns and processions, on the one hand, and the design and decoration of walls and portals, on the other, with particular attention to evocation of the holy places of Jerusalem. This coordinated study of architecture and liturgy provides a potential material setting for liturgical texts, suggests new interpretations of the relief sculpture, and offers insight into the medieval experience of the Armenian church.

Introduction

Then Solomon said: the Lord said he would reside in a dark cloud. I have built for you a dwelling place, a seat of stability for you to reside in forever.

1 Kings 8:12 (Zohrab ed., my trans.)

Lord [...], send to this church the grace of your holy spirit, as in the manner of the temple of Solomon, with a spiritual cloud of your glory, as thick darkness.

The Prayer of Prince Ŷuanšēr, chap. 25, Movsēs Dasxuranc‘i, *History of the Caucasian Albanians* (Dowsett trans.)

In a recent study of early medieval Armenian church inscriptions, Timothy Greenwood noted the Solomonic themes of a seventh-century account of a church consecration by the prince Ŷuanšēr, a text contained in Movsēs Dasxuranc‘i’s tenth-century *History of the Caucasian Albanians* [*Patmut‘iwn Ałuanic‘*]. At the moment of the consecration, Ŷuanšēr prays to the Lord to fill his church with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dark cloud, just as God entered the Temple of Solomon. The use of the Prayer of Solomon for a consecration ritual is of course most appropriate, and indeed, as Greenwood notes, 1 Kings 8 is read as a lection in most Eastern Christian liturgical rites

for the dedication of a church (including the Armenian).¹ The shared themes of the ecclesiastical rite and historical text, made in passing by Greenwood, form the point of departure for the present study. Considering three mid-seventh-century Armenian churches, I examine relief sculpture, epigraphy, and architectural settings in relation to early Armenian ritual, with particular attention to the hagiopolite meanings produced through a liturgical encounter with the Armenian church façade.

In so doing, there are several challenges that I face. The inherent difference between an abstract representation of organized movement and a specific physical setting hamper any straightforward application of texts to monument. Nor can we be sure that the rites, as preserved in the texts, existed at the time of the construction of the churches. Yet in my view it is a graver error to cast these texts aside because they cannot be grafted perfectly onto the architectural evidence. As early, if not contemporary, documentation for the experience of the church building, they allow us precious insight into the symbolic meanings of the church, as evoked through prayer, hymns, and movement.²

That Jerusalem in particular should be evoked through the liturgy is not at all surprising. Scholars have filled many volumes in study of the Armenian experience of the Holy City, whether as a real or an imagined place.³ Jerusalem was the home of a community of Armenians from at least the fifth century, and the sixth and seventh centuries saw increased Armenian pilgrimage to and settlement in the region, as attested by written sources, epigraphy, and archaeological evidence. The seventh-century *Geography* attributed to Anania Širakac‘i, referred to Jerusalem at “the center of all”, like many medieval geographies, and to Armenia as the “northern region”.⁴ Seventh-century Armenian sources chronicle events in the city and their reception at home; they also

include extraordinarily detailed descriptions of the holy places and relics, and an abiding concern for the monuments, their destruction at the hands of the Persians, and their subsequent renewal. The central role of Jerusalem in the Armenian liturgy is attested in the *Armenian Lectionary*, a precious fifth-century text preserving in detail the rites celebrated in Holy City. The subject of many studies, this text offered to congregations in early medieval Armenia an imaginative topography of Jerusalem in which they could commemorate and enact Christ's Passion.⁵

For these reasons, scholars have long understood the built culture of early medieval Armenia in terms of Jerusalem. Armen Kazaryan noted similarities between images of the tomb aedicula of Christ, with its peaked roof and twisted columns, and the design of the drum of the Cathedral of Vałaršapat.⁶ The same scholar drew a persuasive comparison between the aedicula and the liturgical furniture at the church of Zuart'noc' as we will discuss below. The most thoroughgoing hagiopolite interpretation of Armenian architecture is *La Jérusalem nouvelle et les premiers sanctuaires chrétiens de l'Arménie*, in which Nazénie Garibian de Vartavan suggests that the layout of the churches in the holy cities of Vałaršapat (and Mtskheta in Georgia) is based on the topography of the principal holy sites in Jerusalem.⁷

The liturgical dimension of this discussion is understudied. Yet the opportunities for doing so are rich, in light of nature of Armenian architecture and early medieval ritual directives. The prominent exterior position of relief sculpture and epigraphy on Armenian monuments invite us to reflect on the possible role of the exterior facades, as well as the church interior, in shaping the experience of early medieval churchgoer. As we will see, this encounter was inherently multisensory and kinetic, involving seeing and reading,

singing, climbing, carrying, and smelling (the anointed walls), and as such offers an important tool for interpreting the many engraved and sculpted church exteriors of the Armenian tradition. In so doing, I make use of the scholarship on the rite of the Armenian church consecration, and the Hymns (or *šarakans*) of the Holy Cross, and also the aforementioned fifth-century *Armenian Lectionary*.

Mastara/Mazdara

Mastara is one of over seventy seventh-century churches preserved from the regions of historic Armenia, today divided among the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Arc'ax (Mountainous Łarabał), eastern Turkey, Azerbaijan, and northern Iran.⁸ Located in the Aragacotn province of the Armenian Republic, Mastara is dated by its epigraphy to between about 640 and 650. As is typical of Armenian and Georgian architecture, it is constructed of rubble masonry, consisting of a thick core of mortar and fieldstone faced by squared, well-joined slabs of tuff-stone. The plan is centralized with a large dome resting on squinches set into the corners of a square bay, from which three conches project.⁹ The exterior is strongly geometric, dominated by the tall central mass, and elevated on a stylobate.

Four inscriptions appear on the exterior of the church, all of which attest to the historical circumstances of its construction. On the western section of southern elevation, a fragmentary text reads “Of the month Arac' [day 14] at the consecration of this holy church and to the memory of bishop...”¹⁰ Another is located at the southern side above the window over the entrance: “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 [--]’¹¹ On the southern part of the western elevation: “I thank God who permitted me Grēgoras Siwni and beloved nephew Grigor to build a house of glory and through this made me... bishop of Apahunik‘. This is a refuge (*apawēn*) for Mazdara, a place of prayer for the faithful, a place of expiation for sinners, and a memorial for me and for mine. And you who pray, remember us...”¹² Putting together this information, we can surmise that the church was constructed during the episcopate of T‘eodoros Gnuni (c. 645) by the monk Grigoras Siwni and his nephew, for the expiation of their sins and a refuge for Mazdara. We are also provided with a date of Arac‘ 14 (30 November) for the date of consecration.¹³

On the west façade is a fourth inscription that is given particular visual emphasis. It appears within a blind arcade over the west window. The text is arranged around and below a sculpted cross on a pedestal. Although the cross is badly weathered, we can see clearly its stepped podium, flared ends, and also what seem to be tendrils or wings extending from its base. The inscription reads as follows:

Ա(ՍՏՈՒԾՈ)Յ ԱՃՈՂԵԼՈՎ ԳՐԻԳՈՐԱՍԱ(Յ) ՎԱՆԱԿԱՆԻ ՇԻՆԵՑԱԻ ԱՊԱԻԷՆ ՄԱԶԴԱՐԱԻ
 ԱՅՍ ԿԱԹՈՂԻԿԷ ՀԱՐՍ ԿԵԱՉ(ԱՆ)ՇԱՆ ԹԱԳԱԻ ՊՍԱԿԵԱԼ ՈՒՆԻ ՓԵՍԱՑ ԶԲՐԻՍՏՈՍ
 ՓԵՍԱԻԻ ԶԱՌԱՔԵԱԼՍ ՄԱՐԳԱՐԷՍ ԶՎԿԱՅՍ ՍԱ ՊԱՐԵՇԷՆ ՈՒՆԻ ԶՄԱՍՏԱՐԱ ԵԻ ՓՐԿԷ
 ԶԳՐ(ԻԳՈՐՈՍ)

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 as bridegroom Christ and as bridal companions the apostles, prophets and martyrs. Keep Mazdara prosperous and save Grigoras.

As Greenwood noted, the reference to the “bridegroom of Christ” is from John 3:29.¹⁴

But the same imagery, with greater emphasis, occurs in two Armenian ritual contexts: the

rite of consecration and, much more robustly, the sequence of hymns devoted to the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.

A 1998 study of the Armenian rite of church dedication ritual by Michael Daniel Findikyan invites us to meditate on the liturgical imagery of the engraved portal and its potential ritual context. Findikyan collated three early textual accounts of this rite: a *maštoc*⁶, or ritual, probably of the late ninth century, and two allegorical commentaries on the consecration rite, both dating to the first half of the eighth century, one by Yovhannēs Ōjnec⁷ and the other attributed to Step⁸anos Siwnec⁹.¹⁵ All three of the texts attest to withdrawal from the building and the performance of exterior services equipped with a cross. First, the altar table is carried out of the church, as the congregation gathers around it singing psalms, after which the altar table is re-installed within the church and elevated to the bema. The next exterior unit is the “Naming of the Church” and the blessing of the exterior walls. At this point, the clergy and congregation depart the monument, and the bishop declares in whose name it has been erected, making a circuit around the church. The allegorical commentary attributed to Step⁸anos Siwnec⁹ further mentions the “tracing the Lord with the cross” on the exterior, and the anointment of the four sides of the building. This exterior moment is felicitous in light of the exterior epigraphy of Mastara.

We can find in these texts nuptial imagery. During the Introit, when the congregation and clergy approach the door of the church carrying the altar, at the door of the church, the bishop traces the sign of the cross over the door and then opens it, which Ōjnec⁷ interprets as “for by the cross Christ opened the entrance to paradise and to the heavenly bridal chamber (*erknayin aragan*an).” This interpretation of the Introit of the

church consecration thus offers a fitting liturgical moment for the Mastara portal, which not only contains the nuptial and cross imagery but which is also located over the western door of the church: on the threshold, therefore, of the “heavenly bridal chamber”.

Another text deserves note in this regard. Findikyan does not include it in his reconstruction of the rite, because presumably it did not occur in any of the three early medieval texts he used, but it is one of two hymns appended to the rite as recorded by Frederic Cornwallis Conybeare. Conybeare tells us in a note that the text is drawn from three manuscripts of the *Ganjaran*, or *Book of Canticles*: 1) BM Or. 2609, entitled “A Canticle of the Shołakat‘ (lit. effusion of light) of the Consecration of the Holy Church; 2) BM Or. 2608, where the text is called “Canon of the Holy Ark and Ecumenical Church;” and finally 3) Vienna Mekhitarists MS 133, where it is titled “A Canticle of the Holy Church.” The index of this final manuscript, Conybeare notes, “ascribes this canticle to one Mkrtitch, who perhaps in the thirteenth century compiled it out of earlier material.”¹⁶ While we cannot be at all sure that this hymn in its preserved form dates from the early Middle Ages, nor that it was sung at the dedication rite, one notes that it is rife with bridal imagery:

“Daughter of Ancient Sion, receiver of the message, **to thee the Bridegroom Christ hath condescended, bringing thee an unfading wreath, by will of Father and of Spirit crowned.** Lo, the Bride gorgeously arrayed in her glory goes forth to meet the Lord the King who is come out to meet (her). Into the Holy pavilion invited, The Bridegroom Christ, the Sovereign, is arrived. The children of the Church encircle him and utter songs of praise...”¹⁷

The crowned bride, we are then told in the following passage, is accompanied by the twelve apostles, the holy prophets, the holy pontiffs, and the blood of the holy martyrs— an ensemble of figures which brings to mind the Mastara inscription, with its crowned bride and her companions, the “apostles, prophets, and martyrs”.¹⁸

We find the greatest liturgical parallels with the inscription, however, in the many hymns sung on the Feast of the Cross, as noted already by Patrick Donabédian in a footnote to his discussion of the church of Mastara in a study of 2008.¹⁹ These hymns, studied in depth by Athanase Renoux, have much more recently formed the focus of publications by Findikyan, and I provide here a selection of pertinent passages from his English translations.

Canon for the Dedication of the Holy Cross:

4. At the newly-marvelous Dedication in Jerusalem [հորահրաւ ցալաղատիսն որ յերուսաղեմ] **your cross** was shown to us in radiant majesty, O Lord, God of our fathers...**A queen stands on the right, the holy Church, crowned in gold braids, in the sign of your cross** [հրեւեան իսչի], O God of our fathers...²⁰
5. Bless the Lord and exalt him forever.
For the holy Church is betrothed to Christ. The heavenly bridegroom has crowned her with the cross; to the left and to the right it takes wing, making heirs of nations.²¹
19. Faithful people, let us always sing a triumphant and new blessing in the highest to Christ the king. **Who came to illuminate his chosen, holy church. And he crowned her with his holy cross.** Let us sing his glory. Today we too celebrate the Dedication [of] the Holy Cross. And to the Saviour we offer glory and honor forever.²²
39. **The Heavenly Bridegroom has come near you. Granting your salvation, he has crowned you with his wondrous glory.**²³
41. **Rejoice O Holy Church, for Christ the king of heaven today has crowned you with his cross, and he has adorned your fortress with his wondrous glory....** With the choirs of the heavenly hosts, we celebrate today and lift up unceasing glorification. **Be glad, immaculate Bride, in your inscrutable mystery.**²⁴

As in John 3:29, the texts above refer to the bride (*hars*) and the bridegroom (*p'esa*); the hymns, unlike the biblical text, indicate that the Church is the bride. In no fewer than four of the verses, the bride is crowned with, or with the sign of, the cross. In the hymns this is rendered as *nšxanaw xač'i psakeal*; in the Mastara inscription, *xač'anšxan t'agaw psakeal*.

At Mastara, the bas-relief cross forms the center of the composition both visually and thematically. The text is positioned in lines on either side of the form, requiring the

viewer to pass over the cross in order to make sense of individual the names “Grigoras” and “Mazdara”. In the latter case, the “Z” (Զ) is engraved into the base of the stepped podium, forming a kind of decorative form.

By its position at the base of the cross, and its circular form, this letter might have also reminded the spectator of the “place of the skull”, or, literally, Golgotha. As mentioned above, the cross above it is of the Latin type, and has flared arms, a form widely known from early Byzantine and Armenian metalwork and sculpture. Because of its base, it further resembles what is variously called a stepped, graded, or Calvary cross, the last term making clear reference to the mound on Golgotha where the shrine of the Crucifixion is located. In seventh-century Byzantine art, this stepped cross type is used on the *solidi* of Heraclius in reference to his victorious return of the True Cross to Jerusalem in 630-- an event to which we will return in a later section. In other ways, the Mastara cross resembles Armenian stone crosses of the same era, such as those from T‘alin and Duin, from the basis of which project a pair of tendrils or wings. A hymnographic reading of the Mastara cross, I would argue, invites the latter interpretation; one will recall that the imagery of the bridegroom crowning the bride with a cross that “to the left and to the right ... takes wing,” (*ew yaj ew yaheak t‘rowc‘eal*). The coordination of the cross and text certainly support, in my view, Donabédian’s passing note on the source of the Mastara inscription. These correspondences allow us to imagine the inscription, and more broadly the west and south walls of the church, as appropriate settings for the singing of the hymns on the Dedication of the Cross.

It is relevant, then, to consider Findikyan’s further arguments regarding the date and origins of these hymns. While they are often dated by tradition to early eighth-

century Armenia, Findikyan suggests that their content, arrangement, and vocabulary militate for a much earlier date and, in a related point, their associations with the Dedication of the Holy Places of Jerusalem (the *Encaenia*).²⁵ That is, in Findikyan's view, they were originally sung to commemorate the Encaenia and then later became associated with the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.²⁶ The evidence he brings forward is compelling; the hymns make mention, as we have seen, of the "newly-marvelous Dedication in Jerusalem," and are rife with ecclesiological and architectural imagery.²⁷ Further, the dates of the feast of the Exaltation coincide precisely with those of the Encaenia (seven days beginning 13 September). Findikyan finally notes that the term "cross" used in the hymns could have referred to the shrine of Golgotha—and not the cross itself as a relic—as it was used in the account of the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria, in the fifth-century Armenian Lectionary, and in the tenth-century Georgian Book of Hymns (*Iadgari*).²⁸

We cannot know, of course, how much of this putative hagio-dedicatory meaning would have resonated in seventh-century Armenia; nor, more particularly at the church of Mastara. But it is tantalizing to think that these early festal hymns were sung on the day and subsequent anniversaries of the consecration of Mastara, and that in so doing, they evoked the dedication of the holy places in Jerusalem. For the consecration of a church, such imagery would be both entirely appropriate and historically compelling, to judge from Ĵuanšēr's evocation of Solomon's Temple with which we began. What seems certain is that consideration of the early ritual sources opens up new ways to interpret Armenian church walls, and that the thematic parallels drawn above, interesting in their

own right, also point toward a powerful experience of the church, not only in visual but also aural terms.

Zuart‘noc‘

The church of Zuart‘noc‘ was constructed as part of the residence of Nersēs III, patriarch of Armenia between about 641 and 661. This structure collapsed in an earthquake in the early eleventh century, but is well attested by contemporary sources and preserved archaeological remains. Built to commemorate a heavenly vision of the patron saint of Armenia, Gregory, the structure is closely tied with the sacred landscape of Armenia. Yet, as many have pointed out, it also shows familiarity with the cultural traditions of Byzantine Constantinople, Syria and Mesopotamia, and the Holy Land. The program of epigraphy includes not only Armenian but also Greek, attesting, many believe, the close relations Nersēs held with the Byzantine empire. Most interesting in the present context is the unique plan of the church. The inner shell consists of a series of columnar exedrae (the earliest attested example in the Southern Caucasus) joined by large, W-shaped piers which once supported the dome. This tetraconchal shell was enveloped by a quasi-circular perimeter wall. The entire structure was elevated on a tall pedestal of seven steps, broad enough to allow for a walkway around the exterior walls of the church.

The circular plan of the monument finds its most obvious prototype in the martyria of the Holy Land, and above all the Anastasis Rotunda. Completed by 336 to shelter the traditional site of Christ’s burial and resurrection, this structure formed the focal point of Christian Jerusalem, and, indeed, of medieval Christendom more generally. Because of the formal resemblances of the Rotunda and Zuart‘noc‘, scholars have already

drawn a connection between the monuments, either in passing or in more depth.²⁹ In the mid-twentieth century, Step'an Mnac'akanyan made initial and brief notice of the relationship between the two monuments; it was recognized also by L. Durnovo, who in a 1952 essay drew attention to the possibility of Jerusalemic imagery in the applied arcades of early medieval Armenian architecture (and also in the design of canon tables in manuscripts).³⁰ Recently, Dora Piguet-Panayotova, Zaruhi Hakobyan, Nazénie de Vartavan Gharibian, and Armen Kazaryan have produced more comprehensive examinations of the problem. Piguet-Panayotova has suggested that the Rotunda provided the “fundamental elements” of Zuart'noc'. Accepting the three-tiered reconstruction of Zuart'noc' by T'oros T'oramanyan, she argued that both monuments shared the form of superimposed cylinders, the first enclosing the ambulatory, and the second enclosing a gallery level.³¹ She also drew a correlation between the Ionic basket capitals at the Rotunda and on the Temple Mount with those of Zuart'noc'. More recently, Armen Kazaryan proposed a reconstruction of the liturgical space of Zuart'noc'. Based on existing archaeological materials at the church, he envisioned a partitioned enclosure under the domed space of the church, and surrounding the cylindrical cavity at its center.³² Based on the measurements of this crypt, Kazaryan suggested that a cylindrical stone object at the site, previously thought to be an ambo, was originally positioned over the cylindrical pit in the center of the church. This construction, in his view, was designed to mark the relics of Saint Gregory, and, based on its form, was inspired by the Holy Sepulchre.

The exterior sculpture of Zuart'noc' has also been linked to the image of Jerusalem. The arcades of the first tier are composed of double colonnettes crowned with

capitals from which spring molded arcades; their uppermost part is adorned with a rinceau of grape bunches and leaves. Above the rinceau is a large sculpted field containing more grapevines, bunches of fruit, and trees with straight branches from which pomegranates hang. This zone is contained by a horizontal stringcourse, above which appear oculi with diverse ornamented moldings. The first tier of the building is crowned, finally, with a cornice that includes a running band of strapwork.

Patrick Donabédian associates the decoration of the exterior arcade of Zuart‘noc‘ with the Temple of Solomon.³³ He has drawn attention to the descriptions of the Temple in 1 Kings 7 and 2 Chronicles 4:12–13 as possible inspiration for the vegetal and interlace imagery of Armenian churches.³⁴ The Zuart‘noc‘ arcade certainly provides an extraordinarily dense and copious array of associations with the Temple, particularly as described in the book of Kings:³⁵

And he made two covering lattices for the capital and also two covering lattices for the second capital, and hanging work.
And bronze pomegranates in a grating, a hanging work, row upon row. And in that way he made the second capital.
And on the tops of the columns, there was lily work, four cubits long, near the arcade.³⁶ [1 Kings 7:17–19]

Although the specific spatial relations of the building elements in this passage cannot be made to conform to the exterior of Zuart‘noc‘, we should nevertheless note the coincidence of three motifs: the latticework, the pomegranate, and the lily form of the arcade capitals.³⁷

If much ink has been spilled on the hagiopolite associations of the exterior façade of Zuart‘noc‘, the degree to which certain ritual contexts would have activated these meanings has received little attention. As with the façade at Mastara, I propose a scenario in which this perimeter wall was understood in relation to the hymns sung during the rite

of church of consecration. We have already mentioned the procession of entry into the church with the altar. This procession is accompanied by Psalms 119-21: Psalm 119, “In my distress I cry to the Lord”; Psalm 120: “I lifted up my eyes to the hills, from whence my help comes;” and Psalm 121: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’ Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!”³⁸ Findikyan notes that Yovhannēs Ōj nec‘i refers to these three psalms as “gradual psalms” (*salmosk‘ astijanac‘*), and suggests that this may reflect the general belief that they were sung by pilgrims climbing Mount Zion to the Temple.³⁹ The concept of ascent, he continues, is illustrated in the “crescendo from abject despair, through acknowledgement of God as protector to rejoicing for having arrived at Jerusalem.”⁴⁰ One can imagine here how effective such a psalmody would be while climbing the steep podium of Zuart‘noc‘: the themes of the psalms, the built landscape, and the accompanying physical movement would have worked together to recreate the experience of pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The bas-relief figures within the spandrels of Zuart‘noc‘ may also be understood within this context. Eleven are preserved, each holding tools of various sorts. Forming an unusual (although not unprecedented) iconographic subject for the era and region, they have been variously interpreted as holy persons or (mystifyingly) as patrons. Some have proposed that they represent Saint Gregory and the pagan king Trdat building the first Christian shrines in Armenia—a passage that forms part of the fifth-century conversion story. Their costume, their lack of haloes, the specific tools they hold, and the fact that they are shown actually in the process of working on the spandrels, militates, in my view, for a direct interpretation as a team of builders and workers.

But whether or not we wish to assign to them specific and stable identities, one

ought also to consider how the performance of the consecration rite could have inflected their interpretation by the medieval churchgoer. Directly after the singing of Psalms 119-121, another Psalm, 117, is sung three times, after clergy and congregation have processed toward the church and have arrived at its doors. First, the psalm is recited outside the door, and then is repeated until verse 19: “Open to us the gate of mercy”. This verse is repeated three times, the sign of the cross is made over the door, and the bishop intones verse 20: “This is the door of the Lord and only the righteous shall enter.” Then, finally, Psalm 117 is repeated and the bishop and clergy enter. Verse 22 is of particular relevance to the Zuart‘noc‘ imagery: “the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone of the church.”

Findikyan has noted the general appropriateness of this psalm, with its imagery of entrance and its mention of builders, as an “ideal accompaniment to the procession into the newly-built church.” Regarding Zuart‘noc‘ in particular, one can imagine how singing of “lifting up the eyes” and arriving in the gates of Jerusalem, and of builders and stones, accorded with the visual program of the church. Unlike the larger, strongly-projecting vegetal forms of the façade, the builders are carved in shallow relief, and indeed are most clearly apprehended from close to the wall surface. This accords well with the liturgical prescription to sing verse 22 just at the entrance to the church, following the gradual psalms describing the approach to Jerusalem. In this sense, it was not only the eyes and ears of the early medieval participant that were filled with the evocation of the Holy City, but also their bodies, because a procession to any one of the five entrances of Zuart‘noc‘—whether undertaken by circumambulation around the building on its paved walkway, or by climbing the steep steps of the podium-- would

have created physical work akin to that of pilgrimage.

In this context, finally, it is noteworthy that Psalm 117 itself was sung by pilgrims in Jerusalem, as attested by the fifth-century Armenian Lectionary. At the end of his discussion of Psalm 117 in the consecration rite, Findikyan notes that it is prescribed with varying refrains in three contexts: during a procession from the house of Caiaphas to Golgotha during the vigil of Holy Friday, during the Paschal vigil preceding the lections, and, most relevant to the present argument, during a procession from the Mount of Olives to the Anastasis (*Surb Hariwt'awn*—Holy Resurrection) on Palm Sunday. In this last processional, the Lectionary makes clear the action of the participants as “descending” and “psalm-singing” (*salmoselov*).⁴¹ How much of this known to the churchgoer in early medieval Armenia is not clear. Yet it is possible to argue that when sung in the approach to Zuart'noc', Psalm 117 formed part of a coherent and multi-dimensional hagiopolite experience, generated not just by the round shape of the church, its sculpted walls, or the thematic content of the psalm, but also by the association of the psalm with pilgrims processing to the Anastasis Rotunda.

The Church of Mren and the Liturgical Image

The seventh-century church of Mren is located in what is now eastern Turkey in a military zone next to the closed Armenian border.⁴² Mren is well known to historians of Byzantium and Armenia: dating to c. 638, its epigraphy attests to interactions between the emperor Heraclius and the Armenian nobility, and to the imperial goal of consolidating the eastern frontier against Persian attack.⁴³ Mren is also an impressive representative of what is called the “Golden Age” of Armenian architecture and is

additionally famous for its sculpted reliefs, one of which deserves special mention. On the north façade is a portal with a lintel bearing images of a horse, a tree, three human figures, and a central cross. The lintel is, at present, unsupported and unsecured on its left side.

While each of the forms on the lintel is fairly easy to discern, the meaning of their combination has sustained decades of debate. Many of the earliest theories associated the lintel with a princely scene, making particular reference to the presence of the horse.⁴⁴ In 1966, Minas Sargsyan suggested that it depicts a church foundation, enacted by the cleric and nobles named and portrayed on the west portal.⁴⁵ In 1971 and more fully in 1997, Nicole Thierry noted a series of problems with Sargsyan's argument and proposed instead that the scene represents the return of the Cross to Jerusalem by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius in 630.⁴⁶ Noting the invocation of the "triumphant [bareyalt'ot] King Heraclius" on the west portal inscription, Thierry identifies the emperor in the left-hand figure on the lintel, honoring a cross intended to symbolize the relic. The larger censing figure at right represents in her view Modestos, bishop of Jerusalem, who received the relic from Heraclius. This interpretation has attracted the attention and support of many Armenologists and Byzantinists, and I have recently adduced more evidence for this argument in the form of two early medieval Latin accounts of the Return of the Cross which offer a textual explanation for the unusual representation of Heraclius without crown or diadem, and dismounted.⁴⁷

Yet this identification does not account fully for the lintel at Mren, and more particularly, the strong ritual character of the scene.⁴⁸ The large incense burner, at the backswing of its movement, is a type well known from contemporary Byzantine

examples in bronze. The composition focuses our attention on the central cross, which is addressed by all the figures. With decorative branches at the corners of each arm, the cross, like that of Mastara, bears the morphology of late antique and early medieval examples from Byzantium and Armenia, known both from metalwork and from pictorial representation.⁴⁹ These features led Nicole Thierry to regard the scene at Mren as an “imaginative and reduced” image of the Return of the Cross by Heraclius, one which fused the historical event with ritual meaning.⁵⁰

Again, the dedication rite is of particular use in understanding the church facades, and particularly the procession of re-entry accompanied by Psalms 119-21.⁵¹ For a worshipper approaching the north portal at Mren, the imagery of the psalmody would have been particularly germane. Singing the first-person lines, “I lifted up my eyes to the hills, from whence my help comes,” the participants’ gaze would have travelled from the altar stone, removed from the church interior, to the portal, where it would be met by the central cross, supplicants, and the magnificent sculpted tree on its mound. As the words were sung, the visitor’s eyes would, truly, be “lifted” to the scene on the portal. While we cannot be sure that this rite was performed at Mren, it is nevertheless instructive that at an early date in the formation of the Armenian liturgy, a procession into the church was understood in terms of entry into Jerusalem.

The northern position of the portal also holds special significance in this context. Of the lateral sides of the church in early medieval Armenian architecture, the south facade, rather than north was typically preferred for access and epigraphy.⁵² By contrast, at Mren, moving south through the north portal, oriented the spectator not only toward the sacred space of the church but also, at least symbolically, toward Jerusalem.⁵³ This

axis of approach could have evoked the arrivals of Christ, and later Heraclius, to the holy city. Such a procession would also have followed the southward progress of the Heraclian campaigns of 627/8, which descended via the Axurean river valley, quite near Mren, into Persian territory: an operation whose success ultimately led to the surrender of the holy relics to the Byzantines.⁵⁴ The north portal may thus have recalled, at once, memories of recent military campaigns, of the imperial *adventus*, and of the sacred narratives of the Holy Land. The city gate, although absent in the bas-relief, may be understood as the architectural threshold. While the medieval church portal has long been understood as a *topos* for the gates to the Holy City, the north portal at Mren, particularly when read together with the Armenian liturgy of dedication, presents an early and forceful expression of this concept.

Conclusion

I have sought to understand Armenian architectural facades through liturgical rite. At Mastara, the sculpted cross and surrounding inscription were presented in relation to the liturgy of church dedication, the bridal themes found therein, and also in relation to the hymns of the Cross, themselves recently connected to the archetypal Christian dedication service: the Jerusalem Encaenia. At Zuart‘noc‘, a monument already associated strongly by scholars to the Temple and to the Rotunda of Jerusalem, the introit of the dedication rite would have compounded themes of the pilgrimage to and within the Holy City. The participant approached the church while singing of the arrival at the Gates of Jerusalem (Ps. 119-121), and at the doors of the church, he or she would sing of the “builders” in Psalm 117. In this sense, the ritual directives would have attuned the participant to an

experience of Jerusalem through the combined effects of processing, singing, and seeing. At Mren, a sculpted lintel on the north portal may also be understood in view of triple psalmody of the introit. In the case of this church, associated with the emperor Heraclius and the Return of the True Cross, such a procession may be viewed to contain a powerful timeliness, simultaneously recalling to the worshipper multiple periods in the history of Jerusalem, from the time of Christ to the contemporary moment.

Of course, these are not the only ways to understand the imagery of the churches. Indeed, the exercise undertaken here raises the question about what visual interpretation means and entails. A liturgical act takes place through time, and so opens the possibility for a temporary or temporarily-heightened meaning of an image. For example, the Zuart‘noc‘ builders might have been intended to represent Gregory and Trdat, or perhaps the actual building team who worked at the church. But when forming the backdrop for the rite of entry into the church, they would have echoed, and, one may argue, been imbued with, the architectural imagery of Psalm 117, inviting us to consider the way in the language of the psalms, and their performance in procession, inflected, if for a few moments, the visual imagery of the church.⁵⁵ When we remember that the verses were sung at the walls of the church, and prescribed with modulations in volume, we can imagine a powerful moment of transformation, much like the liturgy of consecration as a whole, when the building yard became a holy place. Surely it is in just such a moment that archetypal holy places would be evoked in the mind, as they were for Prince Ŷuanšĕr.

It is also worth underscoring the distinctive nature the exterior ritual acts of the Armenian church consecration and, at the same time, the distinctiveness of the early medieval Armenian and Georgian exteriors. Regarding the former, Findikyan notes that

the exterior canons are not derived from Byzantine liturgy, which contains no equivalent exterior movement. Greenwood, regarding the exterior wraparound inscriptions on Armenian churches, was also unable to find parallels in early Byzantine or Umayyad architecture. I have also noted the strong “exteriority” of Armenian monuments, not only generated through exterior relief sculpture and inscriptions, but also high podia, porticoes, exterior niches, paved walkways and plazas, and nearby stele monuments.⁵⁶ Could it be that these features reflect the desire to generate an exterior landscape akin to Jerusalem, or a place to perform processional rites such as those prescribed in the Armenian Lectionary of Jerusalem? One is struck by how many times pilgrims are described in this text as gathering and/or singing “before” (*arajin*) the church. These are tantalizing questions without ready answers. What is certain, however, is that the preserved liturgical texts are among the most powerful, if largely neglected tools for interpreting Armenian church exteriors.⁵⁷

¹ Greenwood, “A Corpus of Early Medieval Armenian Inscriptions,” *DOP* (2004): 56, footnote 138.

² Consideration of the multi-sensory experience of the Byzantine church interior has emerged in recent decades. See Bissera Pentcheva, “Hagia Sophia and the Multisensory Experience,” *Gesta* 50/2 (2011): 93-111.

³ See, generally, the scholarship of Michael E. Stone, Abraham Terian, and R. W. Thomson. The last author has produced an essay with useful bibliography on the topic: “Jerusalem and Armenia,” in *Papers of the 1983 Oxford Patristic Conference*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Kalamazoo, 1985) 77-91.

⁴ *The Geography of Ananias of Širak: Ašxarhacoyc, the Long and the Short Recensions*, trans. and comm. Robert H. Hewsen, (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert, 1992) 46.

⁵ See above all by Athanase Renoux, “Le Codex Armenien Jerusalem 121” *Patrologia Orientalis* 35/1 36/2 (1969- 1971).

⁶ Kazaryan, “Chancel and Liturgical Space,” 99.

⁷ Nazénie Garibian de Vartavan, *La Jérusalem nouvelle et les premiers sanctuaires chrétiens de l’Arménie* (Erevan: Isis Pharia, 2009).

⁸ Any effort towards a precise count is of course fraught— various numbers can be derived depending on the size of the territory considered, the ways in which the monuments are dated, the decision to include monuments known only from literary sources, and the states of renovation. My number is based in part on the catalogue of Patrick Donabédian, focusing on the Armenian monuments, who suggests that between 630 and 690, “leur nombre pourrait s’élever à une soixantaine pour ces six décennies...” (*L’âge d’or de l’architecture arménienne*, Marseille: Parenthésis, 2008, 275). When we add to this number monuments attributed to the sixth century, the number grows to above 70.

⁹ A type also known also from the churches of Artik, Voskepar, and Haḳiç.

¹⁰ Greenwood, “A Corpus,” 86.

¹¹ Greenwood, “A Corpus,” 84.

¹² Greenwood, “A Corpus,” 85.

¹³ Greenwood, “A Corpus,” 86.

¹⁴ Indeed, Greenwood sees in this reference to the apostle/martyr/prophet John, as the “companion to the bridegroom” but this is contested by Patrick Donabédian, who places apostle/prophet/martyr in the plural and thereby makes them the companions at the wedding. (In classical Armenian, the –s ending can indicate either a declined or a plural noun).

¹⁵ Daniel Findikyan, “The Armenian Liturgy of Dedicating a Church: A Textual and Comparative Analysis of Three Early Sources,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 64, no. 1 (1998): 75-121.

¹⁶ Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare and Reverend A.J. Maclean, *Rituale Armenorum Being the Administration of the Sacraments and the Breviary Rites of the Armenian Church Together with the Greek Rites of Baptism and Epiphany* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905) 19.

¹⁷ Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare and Reverend A.J. Maclean, *Rituale Armenorum*, 20.

¹⁸ Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare and Reverend A.J. Maclean, *Rituale Armenorum*, 21.

¹⁹ “Dans les hymnes liturgiques liées aux célébrations de la croix, est plusieurs fois mentionnée l’Eglise, spouse du Christ, couronnée par lui de la croix.” Patrick Donabédian, *L’âge d’or de l’architecture arménienne* (Marseille, 2008) 156, fn 221.

²⁰ Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Church and the Cross,” *St. Nersess Theological Review* 11 (2006): 63-106 at 74-5. **ի նորաբարս ցավակատիսն որ յերուսաղեմ պայծառագ գեաց**

վայելչոյ[բ] ցուցաւ խաչ քն տր աը—ծ հարցըն մերոց. Կայ դրեթոյ ընդ աջմէ սբ եկեղեցի.

Յոսկէհուրըն պըսակեալ նըբանաւ խաչի քն. սստըւա: Եւ նորածնեալ քն մըկըրտու[բ] սբ

աւագանին. Այսօր սօնեմք ուրախոյթք նըբանաւ խաչի քն. սստըւած հար. Note that the English

translation by Findikyan differs slightly from the Armenian above; he uses *Jaynk ‘at Šarakan* [*Hymns arranged by tone*], Jerusalem: St. James 1914. I could not consult this at the time of writing; instead I used

a hymnal printed in 1833 in Ēmiacin now in the Matendaran (there the hymn appears on p. 387). See

<http://greenstone.flib.sci.am/gsd/cgi-bin/library.cgi?e=d-01000-00---off-0armbook->

[armenian%2chajgirqn%2chaygirq%2carmbook%2cNo%5fDate%5fBooks-01-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-](http://greenstone.flib.sci.am/gsd/cgi-bin/library.cgi?e=d-01000-00---off-0armbook-)

[--4-----0-11--11-hu-50---20-help---00-3-1-00-0-0-11-1-0gbk-00-0-0-11-10-0utfZz-8-](http://greenstone.flib.sci.am/gsd/cgi-bin/library.cgi?e=d-01000-00---off-0armbook-)

[00&a=d&c=armbook&cl=CL5.35&d=HASHcee1ecf25e3766698aa982.](http://greenstone.flib.sci.am/gsd/cgi-bin/library.cgi?e=d-01000-00---off-0armbook-)

²¹ **Քանգի քի է հարսնացեալ Սբ եկեղեցի. Երգնաւոր փեսային պըսակեալ ըզսա խաչին. Եւ յաջ եւ**

յահեակ թոռոյցեալ ըզհեթանոսս ժառանգելով բար:

²² Father Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Church and the Cross,” *St. Nersess Theological Review* 11 (2006): 63-106 at 79-80.

²³ Father Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Church and the Cross,” *St. Nersess Theological Review* 11 (2006): 63-106 at 88.

²⁴ Father Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Church and the Cross,” *St. Nersess Theological Review* 11 (2006): 63-106 at 89.

²⁵ Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Holy Cross and the Jerusalem Encaenia,” *Revue des etudes arméniennes* 32 (2010): 25-58.

²⁶ For example, the patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem (560-638) does not know why the Anastasis is celebrated first (as in the first day) and the Cross second, since Christ first was crucified and then died. See Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Holy Cross,” 29.

²⁷ Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Holy Cross,” 28. Findikyan notes that the hymns of days three, four, and five do not pertain to the cross as much as the church as a concept and as a structure, and some are explicitly concern the consecration of buildings, such as the church of Holy Ēmiacin in Vałaršapat.

²⁸ Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Holy Cross,” 34. It is relevant to our argument that Findikyan, and Athanase Renoux before him, noted the stational character of these hymns. See Michael Daniel Findikyan, “Armenian Hymns of the Holy Cross,” 48-50.

²⁹ D. Piguet-Panayotova, “Recherches sur les tetraconques à déambulatoire et leur décor en Transcaucasie au VIIe siècle,” *Oriens Christianus*, 73 (1989): 166-212; Armen Kazaryan, “The chancel and liturgical space in the church of Zuart‘noc’,” in *Ikonostas. Proiskhozhdenie, Razvitie, Simvolika*, ed. A.M. Lidov (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia), 85-104 (in Russian). Nazénie de Vartavan Gharibian, *La Jérusalem Nouvelle et les premiers sanctuaires chrétiens de l’arménie* (Erevan: Isis Pharia, 2009); Annegret Plontke-Lüning, *Früchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007).

³⁰ Mnac‘akanyan, 147; Lydia Dournovo, “Stennaja Živopis‘ v Aruc,” *Lraber hasarakakan gitut‘yunneri* 1952/1: 49-66.

³¹ D. Piguet-Panayotova, “Recherches sur les tetraconques à déambulatoire et leur décor en Transcaucasie au VIIe siècle” (as above), 176.

³² Armen Kazaryan, “The chancel and liturgical space in the church of Zuart‘noc’.”

³³ Patrick Donabédian, “Les thèmes bibliques dans la sculpture arménienne préarabe,” *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s. 22 (1990–91): 253–314, at 281.

³⁴ Donabédian (“Les thèmes bibliques dans la sculpture arménienne préarabe”) has also suggested that the basket capitals in the church interior may be related to the “bowl-shaped network capitals” mentioned in the construction of the Temple.

³⁵ Donabédian (“Les thèmes bibliques dans la sculpture arménienne préarabe”, 282) cites the tomb of Aludi as presenting a juxtaposition of basketwork capital, pomegranate, and flower forms. I would venture that the example of Zuart‘noc‘ evokes the Temple even more powerfully because of the multiplication of these themes around the perimeter of the church facade. But both sites certainly attest to the power of Solomonic imagery in the construction of early medieval Armenian monuments.

³⁶ 17: Եւ արար երկուս վանդակի ծածկելէ զխոյակն, եւ արար երկուս եւս վանդակի ծածկելէ զերկրորդ խոյակն. գործ կախադանաւ: 18: Եւ երկոցոյնց սեանցն նոնածէս պղնձիս ‘ի վանդակապատսն, գործ կախադանաւ, կարգ առ կարգ: Եւ այնպէս արար երկրորդի խոյակին: 19: ‘ի վ(ե)ր(այ) գլխոյ սեանցն, գործ շոյժանագործ առ կամարաւ ‘ի չորից կանգնոց.
<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/arm/zohrab/armat/armat.htm>.

³⁷ Donabédian, “Les thèmes bibliques,” 280–83.

³⁸ Daniel Findikyan, “The Armenian Liturgy of Dedicating a Church: A Textual and Comparative Analysis of Three Early Sources,” 91-3.

³⁹ Daniel Findikyan, “The Armenian Liturgy of Dedicating a Church: A Textual and Comparative Analysis of Three Early Sources,” 90.

⁴⁰ Daniel Findikyan, “The Armenian Liturgy of Dedicating a Church: A Textual and Comparative Analysis of Three Early Sources,” 90.

⁴¹ Athanase Renoux, “Le Codex Armenien Jerusalem 121” *Patrologia Orientalis* 35/1 36/2 (1969- 1971) 258-9.

⁴² See most recently Donabédian, 108-110; Jean-Michel and Nicole Thierry, “La cathédrale de Mren et sa décoration,” *Cahiers archéologiques* 21 (1971): 43-77 and most recently, Samvel Karapetyan, “Mren և Nra Hušarjanner,” [Mren and its Monuments] *Vardsk’/ Duty of Soul* 7 (2012): 31-63.

⁴³ See *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, trans. Robert Thomson with historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston and assistance by Tim Greenwood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999, 2 vols.).

⁴⁴ See for example Josef Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* (Vienna: Anton Schroll, 1918) 427-8.

⁴⁵ M. S. Sargsyan, “Mreni Tačarə Himnaderneri Patkerak‘andaknerə,” [The Images of Founders on the Church of Mren], *Patma-Banasirakan Handes* 35/4 (1966): 241

⁴⁶ See Jean-Michel and Nicole Thierry, “La cathédrale de Mren et sa décoration,” and by Nicole Thierry, “Héraclius et la vraie croix en Arménie,” in *From Byzantium to Iran. Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoïan*, eds. Jean-Pierre Mahé and Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997) 165-186.

⁴⁷ Christina Maranci, “The Humble Heraclius: Revisiting the North Portal at Mren,” *Revue des études arméniennes* 31 (2009): 359-372. See also Stephan Borgehammar, “Heraclius Learns Humility: Two Early Latin Accounts Composed for the Celebration of Exaltatio Crucis,” *Millennium: Jahrbuch zu Kultur und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr.*, 6 (2009): 161-163.

⁴⁸ Unlike, for example, the eleventh-century *Sacramentary of Mont-Sant-Michel*, in which the story is told in two registers of continuous narrative, the lintel presents a composition centered on the cross (New York: Pierpont Morgan, MS 641, fol. 155v).

⁴⁹ See *Ecclesiastical Silver Plate in Sixth-Century Byzantium*, eds. Susan A. Boyd and Marlia Mundell Mango (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993). For Armenian crosses, see *Armenia Sacra: Mémoire chrétienne des Arméniens (IVe-XVIIIe siècles)*, eds. Jannic Durand, Ioanna Rapti, and Dorota Giovannoni (Paris: Musée de Louvre Éditions, 2007).

⁵⁰ One might add that the proposed liturgification of the Return of the Cross may be seen as in keeping with contemporary Heraclian ideology. See John Haldon, “The Reign of Heraclius: A Context for Change?” in *The Reign of Heraclius: Crisis and Confrontation*, eds. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte (Leuven, Paris, and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2002) 14-15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 91-3.

⁵² See Greenwood, “A Corpus of Early Medieval Armenian Inscriptions,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 58 (2004): 36.

⁵³ Given the off-axis orientation of Mren, however, direct southward travel would actually bring one to the Persian Gulf.

⁵⁴ See Robert H. Hewsen, *Armenia. A Historical Atlas* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) 90.

⁵⁵ I am reminded by a remark by the novelist Edward St. Aubyn: “Metaphors are the part of writing where the imagination is in its freest state. They lay claim to correspondences between things that are not linked in the ordinary world, and so no amount of ordinary research can uncover them. They cannot be willed into existence but have to arise spontaneously” (*The Guardian*, June 2011).

⁵⁶ Christina Maranci, “Performance and Church Exterior in Early Medieval Armenia,” in *Visualizing Medieval Performance: Perspectives, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Elina Gertsman (London: Ashgate, 2008): 17-32.

⁵⁷ The exterior sculpture of Armenia and Georgia is physically fragile. At Zuart‘noc‘, in the Armenian Republic, fragments of the façade now lie on the ground, exposed to weather, lichen, and damp. At the church of Djvari in Mtskheta, Georgia, the wall reliefs are weathering faster than they can be protected. The case of Mren is the most urgent, because the isolation of this church, and its unstabilized condition, mean that the north façade, and its portal, may soon go the way of the collapsed south façade. Tied to the fate of the monuments they adorn, and exposed to the elements, the carved bas-reliefs discussed above require not only the attention of the scholar, but also the care of the preservationist, and one hopes they will receive both.