

to the fourteenth centuries, located near Yeghegis.⁷ Subsequently, following the initiation of the ERC ArmEn project, directed by her,⁸ the research of the archaeological mission “The Making of the Silk Roads in Armenia” (MSRA) received further impetus, with a gradual integration into the framework of a wider study agenda on medieval Armenia. This has allowed the research on Yeghegis to develop in initially unforeseen directions and, thanks to the contribution of the ArmEn research group, has led to the results presented in this volume.

Additionally, and more details will be provided in the coming years, the integrated research of ArmEn and MSRA has enabled the restart, in collaboration with the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Republic of Armenia, of a new season of historical-archaeological investigations at the site of Dvin/Dabil in the Ararat region, which represents one of the major political and cultural capitals of the entire Armenian and Afro-Eurasian medieval period.⁹ But that’s another story, and will be addressed elsewhere [fig. 1].

A LIGHT ARCHAEOLOGY OF YEGHEGIS

From a theoretical and operational standpoint, the archaeological research of MSRA, including that on Yeghegis, focused on options made available by the methodologies of Light Archaeology. According to the definition provided by Nucciotti and Vannini, this means a territorial, non-destructive, historical-archaeological, and stratigraphic approach, following procedures developed in previous research projects in Italy, France, and Jordan, by the chair of medieval archaeology at the University of Florence.¹⁰ These “light” methods, developed within the Italian academic milieu of archaeology from the 1970s, have been integrated with the territorial survey strategies adopted by Hamlet Petrosyan and the Armenian research group for the epigraphic and archaeological study of *khach’k’ars* and Armenian cultural landscapes.¹¹ The interaction between these two approaches of non-destructive (without excavation) archaeological reading at a territorial scale provided an ideal context for a further integration with historical-documentary sources, whose study was conducted and directed by Zaroui Pogossian.

The joint objective, which, from this author’s perspective, has been achieved, was to produce a historical synthesis (not just historical-artistic or historical-architectural) in which the relationships between micro, meso, and macro contexts (or “molar” and “molecular” from the perspective of assemblage theory)¹² could jointly contribute to the extraction of new cultural values from the analyzed context. Such an approach also provided greater analytical detail on the material biographies of the investigated objects and the ways in which they were used, or created, for implementing cultural territorial marking strategies, by a sequence of competing or overlapping local and imperial polities and political ideologies.

Starting with the raw data, from the perspective of Light Archaeology, the stratigraphic components (and their associated relative chronologies) were primarily extracted using methodologies of

- 7 Michele Nucciotti, “Light Archaeology at Yeghegis Jewish Cemetery: Analysis and Interpretation”, in *Material Encounters Between Jews and Christians: From the Silk and Spice Routes to the Highlands of Ethiopia*, Bar Kribus, Zaroui Pogossian, Alexandra Cuffel eds, York 2024, pp. 45–57.
- 8 *Armenia Entangled: Connectivity and Cultural Encounters in Medieval Eurasia 9th–14th Centuries* (ArmEn) funded under a European Research Council Consolidator Grant (Grant number 865067), p. 1. Zaroui Pogossian, University of Florence. See “ERC Project ArmEn”, *Università degli studi Firenze* (www.armen.unifi.it) [accessed on August 24, 2025], for an overview and the list of activities and research products.
- 9 Petrosyan/Nucciotti *et al.*, “Report of 2021” (n. 5); *idem*, “Report of 2022” (n. 5); *idem*, “Report of 2023” (n. 5).
- 10 For a detailed presentation of the genesis of Light Archaeology and the results of its applications in the reconstruction of territorial histories by the group led by Guido Vannini and the author in the first decade of the 21st century, see Michele Nucciotti, Guido Vannini, “Light Archaeology and Territorial Analysis: Experiences and Perspectives of the Florentine Medievalist School”, *Archaeologia Polona*, 50 (2012/2019), pp. 149–169. A more recent application, within the framework of the analysis of historical urban contexts, may be found in Michele Nucciotti, Andrea Biondi, Elisa Broccoli, “Towards Sustainable New ‘Urban Stories’: Light Archaeology as a Tool to Map Historical Transformations Across Time and Space”, in *Un patrimoine pour l’avenir, une science pour le patrimoine: Heritage for the Future, Science for Heritage – Une aventure européenne de la recherche et de l’innovation: A European Adventure for Research and Innovation, International symposium at Louvre, Bibliothèque nationale de France (15–16 March 2022)*, Paris 2022, pp. 198–203.
- 11 A synthesis in Hamlet Petrosyan, *Khach’k’ar*, Yerevan 2015.
- 12 Ben Jervis, “Assembling the Archaeology of the Global Middle Ages”, *World Archaeology*, 49/5 (2017), pp. 666–680.

historical building archaeology or architectural archaeology.¹³ The relative chronology of construction (positive stratigraphic units) and demolition (negative stratigraphic units) actions, documented on the wall surfaces of the investigated architectural structures, whether due to anthropic or natural agents (based on Edward Harris's site-formation processes), allowed for the elaboration of stratigraphic diagrams in the form of Harris Matrixes.¹⁴ Each of them (see chapters 7, 8, and 9 in this volume) represents the synthesis of the material-biography of a specific building or architectural complex.

Through an approach of production archaeology (see chapter 5 in this volume), we were able to characterize the recurrent technological elements observed in the architectural structures. The focus was particularly on the traces of stone material processing, both in terms of the operational chains that determined their general morphology (the processes of splitting, working/cutting)¹⁵ and with the aim of documenting the technologies used in finishing the visible surfaces (finishing processes, smoothing, etc.). The compositional patterns of stone materials were then described in the "atlas of masonries" (see chapter 10 in this volume), organized on the basis of the observed relative chronological sequences. The sequence is therefore not based on "meta-material" principles of a philological or evolutionary nature, such as the concept of "stylistic development," but rather on a materially evident and scientifically verifiable experimental basis.

The dating of masonry types in the atlas, based on stratigraphy, expresses an eminently relative chronology, defining a sequence in relation to intrinsic elements (e.g., masonry X precedes masonry Y; masonry Z follows masonry Y, etc.). The connection of this series with absolute chronology (e.g., ninth century, thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, etc.) is then achieved through the connection of architectural stratifications to elements of absolute dating associated with them (such as inscriptions, epigraphs, calligraphic morphologies, and, to a lesser extent, architectural elements associated with specific chronologies). Such associations, i.e., those between masonry types and absolute dating elements, are also contextualized from a stratigraphic standpoint.

For example, a dated inscription carved on a wall surface of constructed elements, being stratigraphically subsequent to the wall's creation on which it is inscribed, constitutes a *terminus ante quem* for the absolute dating of the wall. Conversely, when it has been possible to identify, for instance, an epigraph installed simultaneously with the construction of a specific masonry (i.e., stratigraphically linked and contemporary with it), the stratigraphic contemporaneity allows the dating of the inscription to extend to the wall construction activity and, consequently, to its masonry type.

Indirect sources, including mentions of specific buildings in documentary or literary sources handed down on paper or parchment, also deserve special mention, as they are also useful for absolute chronological contextualization. For these sources, what has already been discussed in relation to Yeghegis in Zaroui Pogossian's contribution (see chapter 3) applies, despite the margins of speculation that remain wide when attempting to precisely associate a quotation from archival and literary sources with a specific building, not to mention the further difficulties of associating such a source with a specific architectural phase or a stratigraphic unit in a building.

- 13 The use of stratigraphic theories in architecture has a long tradition within the Italian archaeological community, particularly for the study of the medieval period, during which an extensive architectural heritage is preserved almost uniformly (especially from the twelfth century onward) across the Italian peninsula, both in urban contexts and in rural areas. The most comprehensive methodological exposition may be found in Gian Pietro Brogiolo, Aurora Cagnana, *Archeologia dell'architettura – metodi e interpretazioni*, Florence 2012; while a wide range of case studies is available in the scientific journals "Archeologia dell'Architettura" (since 1996, Florence, Italy) and "Arqueología de la Arquitectura" (since 2002, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain). In Armenia, an initial application of this methodology can be observed in the study conducted by Cristina Tonghini and Nadia Montevocchi on the masonry of the Yereruik' Cathedral, see Nadia Montevocchi, Cristina Tonghini, "Lo sviluppo costruttivo della basilica di Ererouk (Armenia), secoli VI-X: una ri-lettura archeologica", *Arqueologia De La Arquitectura*, 9 (2012), pp. 29–56; a topic later revisited in Patrick Donabédian, "Ereruyk: nouvelles données sur l'histoire du site et de la basilique", *Travaux et Mémoires du Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance*, 18 (2014), pp. 241–284, although it lacks a territorial approach that could be properly framed within Light Archaeology.
- 14 Edward C. Harris, *Principles of Archaeological Stratigraphy*, New York, 1979.
- 15 Brogiolo/Cagnana, *Archeologia dell'architettura* (n. 13).

From these necessary premises emerge progressive levels of reliability in the historical reconstruction presented below, which is grounded in material evidence analyzed through light archaeology methods. On the one hand, the proposed relative-chronological datings are highly reliable, as they are based on material evidence that, when sufficiently analyzable, is self-evident and undisputable. From this perspective, the further application of the masonry atlas on a territorial scale – specifically, the topographic and geographic mapping of masonry types sequenced from a stratigraphic standpoint – can and will provide an opportunity to develop a broader territorial stratigraphy. This approach has the potential of highlighting, across different chronological phases, moments of initiation, intensification, or decline in building activities, thereby offering dynamic, territorial-scale data for historical interpretation.

On the other hand, the interconnection between stratigraphic evidence, based on relative chronology, and historical processes, documented by written sources and expressed in absolute dating, hinges on the quality – or “robustness,” we might say – of these connections. Historical-political interpretations, particularly those in which the agency of territorial actors, both local and global, as attested in written sources, is translated into the materiality of archaeological data, are especially sensitive to this factor. The robustness of these connections, as well as the documentary potential of the diverse available sources, must establish, in each specific case, the ultimate boundary of speculative interpretation. This boundary, contingent on the variable robustness of the connection between material and written records, may sometimes (though rarely) be a clear-cut one. More often, however, it is blurred, and in the worst cases, it may remain purely hypothetical.

With these premises and the varying degrees of reliability considered, we have nonetheless sought to provide a consistent historical-archaeological interpretative framework, grounded in material stratigraphic sources. The adopted method can be described as a “linear perspective” approach, wherein light archaeology data are filtered through multiple theoretical tools to construct interpretative scenarios for the medieval materiality of Yeghegis.

LINEAR PERSPECTIVES: UNPACKING HISTORICAL VALUES FROM MATERIALITY

“Est namque superficies extrema corporis pars quae non profunditate aliqua sed latitudine tantum longitudineque atque perinde suis qualitatibus cognoscatur. Qualitatum aliae ita superficiei inhaerent ut prorsus nisi alterata superficie minime semoveri aut seiungi queant. Aliae vero qualitates huiusmodi sunt, ut eadem facie superficiei manente, ita sub aspectu tamen iaceant, ut superficies visentibus alterata esse videatur.”¹⁶

To my knowledge, the text above is the first one dedicated to illustrating the visual effects of linear geometric perspective, which is the method for realistically representing a material object within the two dimensions available in drawings and paintings. The discovery is attributed to Filippo Brunelleschi, the great Florentine architect who also created the magnificent dome of Florence’s Cathedral (1420–1436). However, Brunelleschi never explained it in a written form, limiting himself (so to speak) to a geometric demonstration. The description of linear perspective was instead developed in its theoretical aspects between 1435 and 1436 by Leon Battista Alberti, another great Florentine architect, from whose work *De Pictura* I have taken the quotation.¹⁷ The English translation goes something like this:

“For the surface is indeed the outermost part of the body, which is known not for any depth, but only for its width and length, and likewise for its qualities. Some qualities adhere to the surface in such a way that they cannot be removed or separated at all unless the surface is altered. Other qualities, however, are of such a kind that, while the appearance of the surface remains the same, they lie under the aspect in such a way that the surface appears altered to those who observe it.”

In summary, Alberti discusses the relationship between a material object (i.e., its “surface”) and the

¹⁶ *De pictura* by Leon Battista Alberti (1435–36), Cecil Grayson ed., Bari 1980, p. 36.

¹⁷ In its Latin version, see *Ibidem*.

form it assumes relative to an observer's changing point of view, which influences and explains the representation of the object itself: "in such a way that the surface appears altered to those who observe it." We might observe, as is common experience, that an object appears in different geometric forms as we move around it, approaching or distancing ourselves and viewing it from various angles, while, of course, always remaining the same object.

Translated to the theme of this section, if we replace Alberti's term "object" or "surface" with "history" or "the past" of Yeghegis, and observe it from different perspectives, it reveals itself in various forms, presenting distinct aspects that can never be fully synthesized through a single point of view. To elaborate further: by applying diverse interpretative approaches to the dataset of material and written historical sources available, we can broaden our understanding of the history of Yeghegis in a richer (though inevitably incomplete) manner.

The interpretative frameworks applied to the historical-archaeological sources on Yeghegis represent a small subset of those that could potentially be employed. These were chosen based on the writer's familiarity with certain approaches, as previously utilized in medieval archaeology projects conducted by the University of Florence team elsewhere in Europe and the Levant, and, to a lesser extent, newly adopted for this specific case study. In summary, the primary frameworks include: Great and Little Traditions, Bandmann's architectural copy model, Empires' Theory, and Silk Roads interpretation.¹⁸ Additionally, limited insights draw upon Medieval World Systems and Assemblage Theory, although these played a minor role in the research conducted in Vayots' Dzor and presented in this volume.¹⁹ Beyond these theoretical approaches, three overarching "grand narratives" intersect with the subject of this study: the Mongol Empire, the history of "the Armenians," and the broader theme of connectivity in antiquity.²⁰ Finally, the concept of the Afro-Eurasian Middle Ages, which I developed largely based on the aforementioned theories, can also be regarded as a "grand narrative" framework. It provides a broader context for evaluating the historical-archaeological evidence from Yeghegis and Vayots' Dzor.²¹

GREAT AND LITTLE TRADITIONS IN MEDIEVAL YEGHEGIS

Based on Øystein LaBianca's studies,²² we have, for some years, had a useful theoretical framework

18 Øystein S. LaBianca, "Great and Little Traditions: A Framework for Studying Cultural Interactions Through the Ages in Jordan", *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, 10 (2007), pp. 275–289; Gunter Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning*, New York 2005; Gabriel Martinez-Gros, *Brève histoire des empires: Comment ils surgissent, comment ils s'effondrent*, Paris 2014; Tim Williams, *The Silk Roads: An ICOMOS Thematic Study*, Charenton-le-Pont 2014.

19 Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*, Oxford 1991; Jervis, "Assembling the Archaeology" (n. 12).

20 *Connectivity in Antiquity: Globalization as a Long-Term Historical Process*, Øystein S. LaBianca, Sandra Arnold Scham eds, London 2006.

21 Personally, I define the Afro-Eurasian Middle Ages as follows: "A historical period extending from the seventh to the sixteenth century, encompassing the rise of the Eurasian medieval empires (such as the Tang in China and Islam in the West) and ending with the European colonial expansion during the Age of Discovery. During this period, cultural groups characterized by tribal organization, previously settled in the *barbarica* outside the Roman-Byzantine, Iranian-Persian, and Chinese imperial borders in Antiquity and Late Antiquity, migrated into the ancient empires and established new regimes, institutionally unifying the ancient empires and the former barbarian territories into new, integrated political entities. These tribal groups, asserting themselves as military and governing elites, represented a minority of the imperial population. However, they managed to govern by disarming the productive populace and imposing their monopoly on state violence and resource control. In the southeastern Mediterranean region, the Levant, Iran, and China, the new medieval societies, respectively dominated by Arab, Berber, Turkish, and (later) Mongol tribes, maintained the administrative and fiscal organization of the ancient classical empires and the centrality of urban centers from a settlement and production perspective. These can be collectively described as Medieval Eurasian Empires. These contexts, which represent a majority phenomenon in Eurasia, were extraordinary incubators of cultural entanglement, as they allowed the subject and productive communities to maintain their cultural traditions, thereby ensuring their perpetuation over time and up to the present day. In Europe, however, cultural groups from the Roman *barbaricum* (primarily of Germanic and Slavonic groups), progressively connecting with Greek-Latin ecclesiastical culture, profoundly transformed ancient social and settlement structures, giving rise to a rural-based society that was culturally (and sometimes coercively) inclusive. Military elites and common productive people shared the same culture and religion. Deviations from religious orthodoxy were pursued and repressed by the secular state. This highly conformist society saw, from the tenth century, the emergence of the ideology of the national kingdom in France, foreshadowing the development of the nation-state worldwide." See Nucciotti/Pruno, "On the Archaeology of the Silk Roads" (n. 3), pp. 78–88, for further details on how and why the present definition was developed.

22 LaBianca, "Great and Little Traditions" (n. 18).

for analyzing archaeological datasets in a way that allows us to identify, distinguish, and analyze, within complex assemblages, the inputs stemming from the material markers of large state/imperial systems on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to differentiate these from the material markers of long-standing traditions – localized and less dynamic, typically associated with marginal and rural communities that were, in turn, alternately dominated by various successive imperial states. This, if we may, can be framed as a question of Elites and (or versus) Communities. Following the original conceptualization by Robert Redfield, LaBianca proposed the broad definition adopted here, namely, great traditions simply considered as universalized collective knowledge, and little traditions as localized indigenous heritage and knowledge.²³ For the purposes of studying the Yeghegis area, great traditions and little traditions have also been connected to the segmented medieval imperial societies of Eurasia, with great traditions associated with military elites who seize and monopolize state governance, and little traditions generally linked to disarmed productive communities subject to these elites.²⁴ I will return to this point in the conclusion of this chapter, after first clarifying how the theory of Great and Little Traditions has contributed to the interpretative analysis of the light archaeological dataset from Yeghegis and its surrounding area.

LITTLE TRADITIONS

In the “light” archaeological dataset of Yeghegis, the little traditions of medieval rural communities are primarily observable in dilapidated structures characterized by masonry techniques involving split and roughly worked stones.²⁵ These masonry types differ significantly in construction technology from those with ashlars or roughly-squared stone blocks arranged in parallel courses, typically associated with monumental architecture. Such little tradition masonries appear in various contexts and periods within the area of investigation. Examples include structures dating back to the pre-medieval and medieval periods in Shatin (MSRA, unpublished 2018 survey report), as well as examples possibly from the tenth century in the fortifications surrounding the Zorats’ Church,²⁶ where they also appear in the

thirteenth–fourteenth-century structures excavated by Husik Melkonyan.²⁷ Similar masonry has been documented in the dilapidated buildings of a poultry farming facility near the medieval Jewish cemetery of Yeghegis [fig. 2], also dated to the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, and in recent excavations at Arp’a/Areni, in stratified contexts from the twelfth–fifteenth centuries.²⁸ Given their recurring presence across many centuries and their lack of correlation with geopolitical shifts, such coarse masonry appears to reflect long-term building traditions. I propose that these traditions are associated with non-specialized builders who were integral to local settled communities, persisting over the *longue durée*. Their presence shows the material know-how of social actors often ignored by written sources, who possessed basic technologies to meet the everyday needs associated with permanent settlement. The transmission of technical knowledge for the construction of such masonry types most likely occurred within the community, without a structured master-apprentice hierarchy (associated with specialized craftsmen) and was linked to informal learning methods that were loosely standardized. This made each construction episode simultaneously part of a group of realizations attributable to the community and a unique, unrepeatable event.²⁹ The ongoing activity of the settled communities (possibly for a very long time) in Vayots’ Dzor, characterized by these “little” technological traditions, provided an

23 Robert Redfield, “The Social Organization of Tradition”, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 15/1 (1955), pp. 13–21; LaBianca, “Great and Little Traditions” (n. 18).

24 Martinez-Gros, *Brève histoire des empires* (n. 18); Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, N. J. Dawood ed., Franz Rosenthal trans., Princeton 2015 [1377].

25 See Nucciotti/Pruno, “On the Archaeology of the Silk Roads” (n. 3), for a preliminary discussion on this point.

26 See Fancesca Cheli, Diletta Bigiotti, “The Zorats’ Complex. An Archaeological Stratigraphic Description”, in this volume, pp. XY–XY.

27 Husik Melkonyan, Nyura Hakobyan, “Peghumner Eghegisi Zorats’ Tachari Shurjə [Excavation Around the Zorats’ Sanctuary in Yeghegis]”, *Ėjmiatsin*, 75/8 (2016), pp. 144–166.

28 Nucciotti, “Light archaeology at Yeghegis” (n. 7); Astghik Babajanyan, Kate Franklin, “Everyday Life on the Medieval Silk Road: vdsrs Excavations at Arpa, Armenia”, *Aramazd: Armenian Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 12/1 (2018), pp. 154–182.

29 For a detailed presentation of the process of historical transmission of building technical skills, see Giovanna Bianchi, “Trasmisione dei saperi tecnici e analisi dei procedimenti costruttivi”, *Archeologia dell’Architettura*, 1 (1996), pp. 53–65.

initial cultural material landscaping of the medieval Yeghegis area.

It can be seen as a primary cultural-material context that served as a technical background for the transformations induced by the local activity of subsequent groups of medieval elites, which, starting from the ninth century, contributed to the material marking of this territory with distinct great traditions. Foremost among these elites, with remaining traces in extant buildings, are the princes of Syunik’.

A LOOK INTO GREAT TRADITIONS (BRIDGING BANDMANN’S INTERPRETATION)

Great Traditions are complex entities, even when considering solely their material aspects. For the purposes of the present work, they can be understood as significant associations of recurring formal elements, such as architectural, artistic, or urban forms, which collectively define a geographic space as a unified cultural realm and make the territory an effective vehicle for broadcasting a political ideology of an empire (or kingdom, or, using Ibn Khaldun’s terminology, a state/*dawla*) and favor its replication. The complexity of Great Traditions arises primarily from the dynamics of layering, selection, and innovation, each peculiar to its own context.³⁰ In the perspective adopted in this study, the patrons of architectural projects, generally speaking, “the territorial political elites,” directly participate in the selection of architectural forms that convey meaningful ideological and political content. They are therefore considered the main authors and not mere sponsors of the artistic and architectural works created by the artists. Therefore, the emergence of architectural forms in a given period on a given territory is not primarily considered in relation to stylistic-formal developments. Instead, following Gunther Bandmann, I look at architecture as expressing patrons’ desire to legitimize their social position by willingly selecting architectural archetypes bearing a political-ideological meaning with which they want to align themselves.³¹ In this perspective, architectural forms are no longer regarded solely as the product of the creative genius of individual artists but rather as the joint outcome of a social elite capable of selecting architectural types associated with specific meanings

30 For example, examining the Great Tradition of early Islamic caliphates between the seventh and ninth centuries (when Arab elites predominated in state leadership, before later being supplanted primarily by Turkic or Berber groups within Islamic empires), it comprises elements inherited or carefully selected from the Great Traditions of empires that were assimilated (such as the Sasanians) or extensively conquered (like the Roman) by the Umayyad Caliphate, integrated with identity elements from Arab tribal communities (originally part of a set of “little traditions”). Another example is how elements of Persian architecture, like the *iwan*, or circular city planning (as seen in Baghdad or Sabra Mansuria) were acquired from the Sasanian imperial tradition into the Islamic Great Tradition. Similarly, Roman (or Byzantine) elements were synthesized into the Islamic Great Tradition, evident in the mosaics of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus or the wall paintings of Qusayr Amra in art, and in urban planning, in the structure of *amsar* garrison towns like Kufa or Ayla and other Islamic legionary cities. Some, not all, of the issues are obviously much more complex (Reem Samed Al Shqour, *The Aqaba Khans and the Origin of Khans in Jordan: An Archaeological Approach*, Piscataway (NJ) 2019, pp. 12–43). However, the Islamic Great Tradition, whether material or non-material, cannot be reduced to a mere compilation of preceding imperial traditions from which Islam drew its early sustenance (geographically speaking too). Sasanian and Roman elements stratified in the Islamic Great Tradition were carefully selected and, equally importantly, deeply re-semanticized to convey new concepts. For instance, the cruciform plan of the third-century *chahar taq* at Firuzabad, originally likely a Zoroastrian fire temple, was repurposed as a throne hall layout in Islamic palaces such as those of Kufa and Amman. The apse of Christian churches was “reemployed” as the *mihrab* in the *qibli* walls of mosques, often accompanied by a central nave and a dome, modeled after the Christian sacred space (especially during the Fatimid era according to Michael Brett, *The Fatimid Empire*, Edinburgh 2017, pp. 38–59), yet fundamentally different in function from a church. Conversely, the mosque space monumentalizes (or “universalizes,” in the jargon of Great Tradition studies) the spatial organization of a typical Medina house of the seventh century, originally part of the repertoire of pre-Islamic Arab “little traditions”... and so forth.

31 Although Bandmann’s research is over seventy years old, leading figures in German architectural history continue to assert its fundamental validity, even within the framework of contemporary scholarship. On this topic, see Hans Josef Böker’s Afterword in the 2005 English edition of Bandmann’s volume. Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture* (n. 18). The renewed archaeological interest in the historical meaning of architecture has recently engaged – either explicitly or implicitly – with the theme of the extra-stylistic reception of forms or types of buildings over remote spaces and times, a concept originally analyzed and formalized by Bandmann: for Ayyubid Jordan, see Nucciotti/Fragai, “Ayyubid Reception Halls” (n. 1), pp. 489–501. For Fatimid Cairo, see Stephane Pradines, “Identity and Architecture: The Fāṭimid Walls in Cairo”, in *Earthen Architecture in Muslim Cultures*, Stephane Pradines ed., Leiden 2018, pp. 104–145. For this reason, in the case study of Yeghegis, it was decided to undertake an experimental territorial archaeology approach to test the results of applying Bandmann’s interpretative models, integrated with sources from Light Archaeology.

and a community of artists tasked with their realization. Architectural forms are thus reinterpreted as historical sources on their own right. Each instance of “public architecture” becomes part of the “public discourse” that elites communicate to their subjects, peers, and overlords through various media. This approach allows architecture sponsored by elites to be analyzed in conjunction with a plurality of other historical sources, including written records, iconographic or artistic evidence more broadly, and, of course, stratigraphic-archaeological contexts.

CHURCH LANDMARKING

Starting from the ninth century and the Old Church of Yeghegis [fig. 3] (see below chapter 7), from a technological standpoint, one may observe the use of roughly squared stones in the building; already a more elaborate type of craftsmanship compared to the split, coarsely worked stones associated with little traditions of rural communities. From a planimetric perspective, the Old Church shows a single-nave, single-apse layout. The reference to stone donations in the inscription associated with the construction phase of the building, dated 851 and practically contemporaneous with the relocation of the main branch of the Syuni princes to Yeghegis as their center, highlights the significance of Yeghegis for the local aristocracy, or *nakharars*, to use the indigenous term.³² The inscription points to a locally significant investment which effectively centralizes the site and its territory politically (likely benefiting local aristocrats, too). In terms of territorial marking, single-nave and single-apse churches appear to be closely associated with the local architectural expressions of the Syuni dynasty. Notably, during the same period, another single-apse church was constructed near Yeghegis and dedicated to St Sion [fig. 3].³³ This church is the oldest within the Arates monastic complex. Given the striking similarity in their plans, it is worth considering the possibility that the morphology of the Old Church and of St

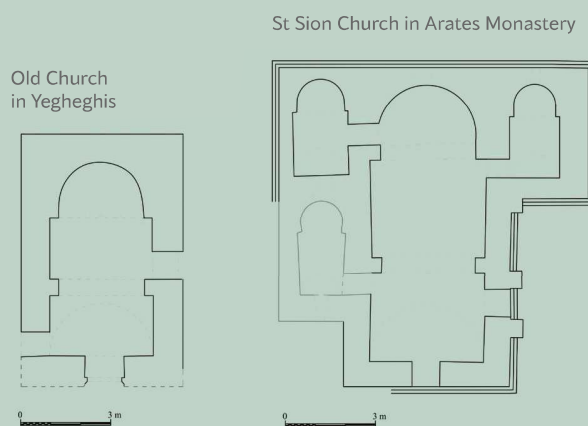


[fig. 2] a) fortifications around Zorats' Church;
b) on the left, structured excavated by H. Melkonyan;
c) poultry farming facility near medieval
Jewish cemetery of Yeghegis

³² See Hamlet Petrosyan, Zaroui Pogossian, “Armenian Inscriptions From and Around Yegheghis”, Inscription vi.1, in this volume, pp. XY–XY.

³³ According to the dating accepted by the author, see Nucciotti/Petrosyan, “The Making of the Silk Road” (n. 4).

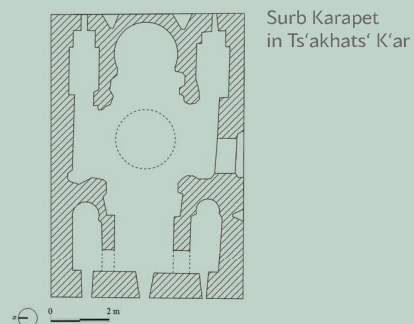
[fig. 3] On the left, plan of the 9th-century Old Church in Yeghegis; on the right, plan of the St Sion Church in Arates Monastery



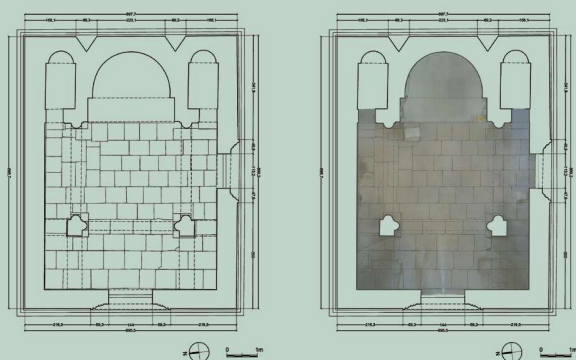
St Asvatsatsin Church in Arates Monastery



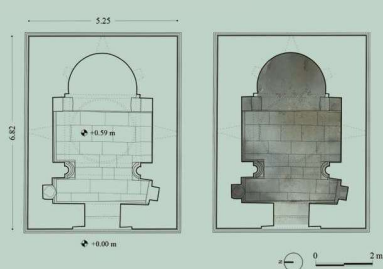
[fig. 4] Plans of St Asvatsatsin Church in Arates Monastery (top left), St Asvatsatsin Church in Areni (bottom left), Surb Karapet in Ts'akhats' K'ar (top right), Cupola Church in Yeghegis (bottom right)



St Asvatsatsin Church in Areni



Cupola Church in Yeghegis



Sion held symbolic significance in relation to the princely landscape the Syuni dynasty sought to establish in Vayots' Dzor during the ninth century.

In the early eleventh century, under the influence of the Bagratids, whose capital was in Ani, we witness the appearance of new architectural forms in the religious landscape of the Yeghegis area, notably the two eleventh-century cupola churches of St Karapet, constructed within the monastic complexes of Ts'akhats' K'ar and St Astuatsatsin, again in Arates Monastery [fig. 4]. The architectural language employed represents a transfer to Vayots' Dzor of morphological repertoires developed in the Bagratid capital, which was the seat of one of the most mature and autonomous among medieval Armenian architectural Great Traditions. The two domed churches of Ts'akhats' K'ar and Arates materially marked Yeghegis' integration into the domains of the Bagratid kings. The connection may be further substantiated by epigraphy, namely by the presence of a Bagratid king and of the Vardapet Vardik explicitly mentioned in inscriptions, the latter at both sites. The latest reference to Vardik dates to 1061, and his name appears on the southern wall of the church of St Karapet (Holy Precursor) at Ts'akhats' K'ar, alongside an inscription attributed to King Gagik Bagratuni, dated to 1043–1044.³⁴ Similarly, Vardik is referenced in inscriptions at Arates.³⁵ The possible involvement of *vardapets* in architecture is demonstrated by the activities of Vanakan Vardapet, who played a crucial role in the construction of sacred spaces during the Mongol period, such as the Khoranashat Monastery.³⁶ This suggests that *vardapets* could take on dual roles as theological scholars and architectural *Bauherren*. The association of Vardik with both Ts'akhats' K'ar and Arates may position him within this tradition, as a key figure in the Bagratid program of architectural patronage aimed at reinforcing their authority through the creation and dissemination of Great Architectural Traditions that served as tools of political and cultural integration.

Of particular interest in this regard is the remodeling of the portal of the Old Church of Yeghegis, executed in forms, techniques, and materials similar to those used in eleventh-century Bagratid domed churches.³⁷ When considered within the framework of the construction activities of the eleventh century documented by epigraphic evidence in Ts'akhats'

K'ar, and Arates, the remodeling of the portal of the Old Church may reflect an intention to ideologically "reconsecrate" ancient Syuni buildings with a new set of architectural markers derived from Bagratid Ani.

The architectural type of the cupola church, introduced into the Yeghegis Valley by the Bagratids in the tenth–eleventh centuries, appears to have played an "archetypal role" in shaping the architectural markers of the territory during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, coinciding with Yeghegis' *floruit* under the Ōrbēleans. This dynasty may have contributed to the elaboration of their own Great Tradition by deliberately selecting the cupola church type, potentially adopting it with a legitimizing function within the complex political environment of their time.³⁸ In this regard, it is worth recalling how the Ōrbēleans, from the twelfth century and continuing into the thirteenth, repeatedly claimed the cultural, symbolic, and at times political heritage of the Bagratids of Ani.³⁹ In other words, in Yeghegis – and as we will also see in Arp'a/Areni and Noravank' – through their adoption of the architectural type of the cupola church, the Ōrbēleans may have presented themselves as heirs, both culturally and politically, of the Bagratid/Armenian polity. This polity was regarded in the thirteenth century as representing the golden age of Armenian political history, and the appropriation of architectural types traditionally associated with the ancient dynasts reinforced this claim.

Significantly, Ōrbēlean cupola churches are built in the political centers of Yeghegis (second half of the

34 Sedrak Barkhudaryan, *Divan hay vimagrut'yan. Prak III. Vayots' Dzor: Yeghegnadzori ev Azizbekovi Shrjanner* [Corpus Inscriptionum Armenicarum. Vol. 3. Vayots' Dzor: Districts of Yeghegnadzor and Azizbekov], Yerevan 1967 (henceforth CIA, vol. 3), pp. 146–147.

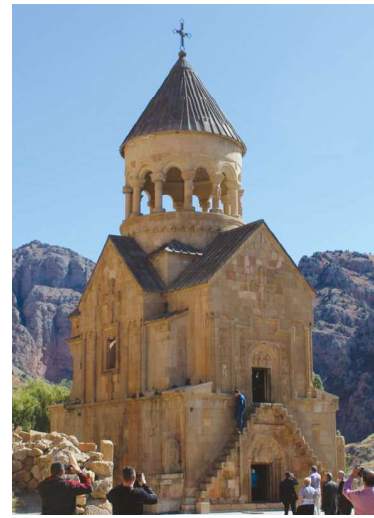
35 *Ibidem*, p. 122.

36 Gohar Grigoryan, "The Construction of Sacred Spaces in Thirteenth-Century Armenia: Liminal Experience and Spiritual Expectations Within the Gawit", in *Approaches to Sacred Space(s) in Medieval Subcaucasian Cultures*, Michele Bacci, Natalia Chitishvili, Gohar Grigoryan eds, Rome 2023, pp. 100–137, sp. pp. 131–133.

37 See Michele Nucciotti, Francesca Cheli, "The 'Old Church': An Archaeological Stratigraphic Description", in this volume: sus 49–50 and 45–47.

38 On these dynamics see Zaroui Pogossian, "Vayots' Dzor, Syunik' and the World: Global Transformations and Local Dynamics Between the 9th and 14th Centuries", in this volume, pp. XY–XY.

39 Sergio La Porta, "Lineage, Legitimacy, and Loyalty in Post-Seljuk Armenia: A Reassessment of the Sources of the Failed Ōrbēlean Revolt Against King Giorgi III of Georgia", *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, 31 (2009), pp. 127–165.



[fig. 5] Cupola churches of Yeghegis (on the left), Areni (in the center) and Noravank' (on the right)

thirteenth century), Arp'a/Areni, and in the family monastery of Noravank' (first half of the fourteenth century) [fig. 5]. Given their chronological sequence, it is plausible that the Ōrbēleans may have also employed this architectural type as a suitable marker for buildings associated with their *darapases*, serving, so to speak, as an appropriate form for what could be considered a "palatine chapel." In this sense, such use might have been initially conceived in Yeghegis, later replicated in Areni (1321, St Asuatsatsin/Mother of God), and eventually reaching an idealized form in the mausoleum of Burt'el Ōrbēlean, designed by Momik at Noravank' (completed around 1339). There, the superimposition of a Cupola Church on a dynastic mausoleum may evoke the original association between a palatine church and a *palatium-darapas*. If we accept this possibility, the princely family, who resided in the *darapases* during their lives, would be laid to rest after death in a mausoleum functioning as the funerary counterpart to the *darapas*, directly connected to an upper-level cupola church. The idea of combining a cupola church with a mausoleum in a single structure, moreover, might have been inspired by the example of Tat'ew. At this site, the seat of one of the episcopal sees of Syunik', one could observe the subsequent superimposition of the eleventh-century

cupola church of St Asuatsatsin atop an older funerary space [fig. 6].⁴⁰ This inspiration, later developed into innovative forms by Momik at Noravank', may have taken shape within the framework of the ambitious restorations carried out by Bishop Step'anos Ōrbēlean at Tat'ew in the early fourteenth century.⁴¹

At this point in the discussion, it is worth including some considerations about the church of Zorats' [fig. 7].⁴² This church represents, in some

⁴⁰ Arsen Harutyunyan, *Tatev, the Spiritual Citadel of Syunik: An Illustrated Investigation*, Karen Matevosyan ed., Yerevan 2024, pp. 31–42.

⁴¹ Among the innovations compared to Tat'ew, the pair of corbelled staircases stands out as one of the prominent architectural features of Burt'el Ōrbēlean's mausoleum-church at Noravank'. For a perspective of the history of this architectural device, see Patrick Donabédian, "Armenia – Georgia – Islam: A Need to Break Taboos in the Study of Medieval Architecture", in *L'arte armena: Storia critica e nuove prospettive. Studies in Armenian and Eastern Christian Art*, Aldo Ferrari, Stefano Riccioni, Marco Ruffilli, Beatrice Spampinato eds, Venice 2020 (= *Eurasistica*, 16 [2020]), pp. 63–112, sp. pp. 89–90, meticulously reconstructs its development, dissemination, and chronology. According to his account, similar staircases, initially used in Armenian ecclesiastical architecture from the thirteenth century, later appeared in Muslim contexts in the Anatolia-Armenia region. After their adoption in Islamic settings, this architectural feature eventually returned to Armenian Christian architecture, becoming a distinctive element in fourteenth-century buildings, such as in Noravank'.

⁴² See chapter 8 in this volume for details.



[fig. 6] St Astvatsatsin Church in Tat'ev

[fig. 7] Low altitude drone photo of Zorats' Church



ways, a connection between the dynastic mausoleum at Noravank' and the princely seat of Yeghegis. On one hand, it could potentially be identified with the "noravank'" (literally "new monastery") where the celebrated artist Momik produced the illustrated gospel for Step'anos-Tarsayich Ōrbēlean (r. 1314–1331), as suggested by Husik Melkonyan, who conducted the most recent excavations at the Zorats' site. On the other hand, both the mausoleum and the church of Zorats' were commissioned by the same prince, Burt'el Ōrbēlean.⁴³

Both buildings also present unique architectural features, which, from the perspective of the Great Traditions, highlight a pivotal moment in Ōrbēlean architectural patronage. While the Ōrbēleans, on one hand, reasserted their appropriation of Bagratid architectural models – for example, with the foundation of the "palatine" cupola-church at Arp'a/Areni – on the other hand, they sought to distance themselves from ancient archetypes, positioning themselves as original creators of innovative architectural forms at Noravank' and Zorats'.

The figure of Burt'el Ōrbēlean appears well-suited to be considered pivotal in the reformation of the public image of the dynasty at the height of the fourteenth century. As detailed in his biography, his

sponsorship of buildings with such innovative forms could be linked to a renewed hegemonic territorial role for his family, particularly in relation to the P'roshean "cousins," with whom Burt'el contested the control of the Glazdor university seat.⁴⁴ His political and military successes positioned him as the primary strategic partner of the Ilkhanids in Vayots' Dzor. As an international-level politician with stable relations and frequent visits to the imperial capitals of Tabriz and Soltaniyeh, Burt'el emerges as the most likely figure to have instigated significant changes and expressed an acute awareness of his status through profound innovations in the typological repertoire of architectural landmarks employed in Vayots' Dzor.

NON-CHURCH LANDMARKING

In addition to churches, the landmarking of Vayots' Dzor, still from the perspective of the Great Traditions, obviously included numerous secular buildings, as well as territorial cultural markers that were both secular and religious, such as *khach'k'ars* (in clusters, isolated, or executed as rock decorations)

43 See Zaroui Pogossian, "The Golden Age of Yeghegis in the 13th and 14th Centuries" in this volume, pp. XY–XY.

44 See Pogossian, "Vayots' Dzor, Syunik' and the World" (n. 38).

and elements of heraldic or para-heraldic character, such as decorative patterning that seems particularly relevant in relation to the Ōrbēleans and Yeghegis in the medieval period. Regarding this group of markers, I will not discuss the issue of *khach'k'ars*.⁴⁵ Instead, I will provide some considerations regarding the issue of heraldic and para-heraldic elements at the end of this paragraph, where I will primarily focus on the architectural heritage associated with territorial elites.

Considering the secular buildings, we can distinguish three types of structures based on the preserved material evidence: fortresses, audience halls, and caravanserais. Among the fortresses directly associated with Yeghegis, we can include the large complex of Smbataberd (located on the crest of a hill between Yeghegis and Artabuynk') and the elliptical fortified enclosure within which the Zorats' Church was established at the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁴⁶ Regarding the audience halls of the medieval *darapases*, nothing has remained standing in the main Ōrbēlean political centers, namely Arp'a/Areni and Yeghegis, nor has archaeology so far identified structures that can be certainly attributed to these architectural complexes. This is true except for what was mentioned above about the possible location of the Ōrbēlean *darapases* near the cupola churches of the two sites and the probable origin of some of the *spolia* reused in the late medieval structures of Arp'a/Areni from the *palatium* of Tarsayich Ōrbēlean.⁴⁷ However, relating to the 1330s, the audience hall of the (probable) palatial complex associated with Ch'esar Ōrbēlean has been well preserved in the village of Hors. The same Ch'esar Ōrbēlean also presided over the (re)construction of the Selim caravanserai between 1327 and 1332, under the umbrella authority of the Ilkhan Abu Sa'id (r. 1316–1335). This caravanserai, undoubtedly the most famous among those preserved in present-day Armenia, allows us to appreciate the sophistication of the association of service and reception spaces and can contribute to the discussion related to audience halls. With regards to its main purpose, as an ancillary infrastructure of the thirteenth–fourteenth-century Silk Road system, Selim will be further considered in relation to the nearby caravanserais of Aghnjadzor and the now-lost caravanserai of Aghavnadzor, all three located on the connection track between the southern plains of

Lake Sevan and the quasi-urban settlement of Arp'a/Areni.⁴⁸ But let us proceed in order.

Regarding the fortresses, the only one unanimously identified as such is Smbataberd [fig. 8], located near the monastery of Ts'akhats' K'ar on the ridges separating the Yeghegis valley from the valley culminating at the Selim Pass. Research conducted on the site so far does not allow a thorough investigation of its construction history or precise dating. Alternately associated with three dynasts named Smbat (two Syuni and one Ōrbēlean),⁴⁹ the Smbataberd fortress is encircled by two–three-meter-thick walls, better preserved in the northern part. These walls follow the natural terrain, creating an irregular plan of a roughly triangular shape, with the main axis, from the NE vertex to the SW base, reaching up to 160 meters and the maximum width (to the SW) of around 115 meters. The perimeter walls of the fortress have three access points: the main entrance in the north, another in the east, and a non-monumental one in the northwest. The north gate appears to have been used as the principal entrance. A citadel, the most fortified structure, sits at the site's highest point, comprising two parts with thick, recently restored walls. Numerous smaller buildings inside the walls have varying plans and unclear functions.

The initial stratigraphic surveys have identified five types of masonry, among which MT1 and MT2 are stratified, with the latter following the former.⁵⁰ MT1, with its foundation directly on the rock, consists of roughly horizontal and parallel rows of basaltic rough-hewn stones, mostly sub-rectangular in shape. Overall, the masonry shows a certain organization, though the size of joints and beds is considerable (with a maximum of 6.5 cm for the joints and 5.4 cm for the beds). MT2, on the other hand, composed of limestone blocks, shows a more regular organization

45 Petrosyan, *Khach'k'ar* (n. 11).

46 See Phase I, B3, in chapter 7 below.

47 Babajanyan/Franklin, "Everyday Life on the Medieval Silk Road" (n. 28).

48 Leonardo Squilloni, *La via della seta nell'Armenia medievale: Indagine archeologica di tre caravanserragli nel Siunik storico*, Master's thesis, (University of Florence), Florence 2020, cap. 4 (unpublished thesis); Varazdat Harutyunyan, *Mijnadaryan Hayastani k'aravanatnēr u kamurjnerā* [Caravanserais and Bridges of Medieval Armenia], Yerevan 1960, pp. 21 *et seq.*

49 Smbat I reigned from 890 to 914, and Smbat II Tiezerakal reigned from 977 to 990. Smbat Ōrbēlean died in 1273 in Tabriz.

50 MT's numbers refer to Smbataberd fortress and not to the Atlas (Nucciotti, Pruno and Somigli in this volume, pp. XY).