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AFRO-EURASIA

2

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**Armenia  
Entangled**  
Connectivity and Cultural  
Encounters in Medieval  
Eurasia 9th - 14th Centuries



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# Cultural Entanglements across Medieval Armenia

*Catalogue of the Photo Exhibition*

9 April – 12 June 2026

University of Florence,

Palazzo Fenzi-Marucelli

Curated by

GOHAR GRIGORYAN

ZAROUÏ POGOSSIAN

IRENE TINTI

within the ERC project ArmEn



*All'Insegna del Giglio*

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## HOSPITALITY ARCHITECTURE ON THE MEDIEVAL SILK ROAD(S)

*Leonardo Squilloni*

Located on the Vardenis Pass, on the mountain range dividing the Vayots‘ Dzor and Geghark‘unik‘ provinces of the Republic of Armenia, the Selim or Örbēlian Caravanserai stands as a powerful testament to the cultural entanglements that shaped medieval Eurasia. Commissioned in the early 14th century by the princely Örbēlian family, this architectural complex was more than a shelter for travellers and merchants; it was a deliberate political and cultural statement.

Situated on a secondary branch of the Silk Road(s), Selim formed part of a broader Örbēlian strategy to integrate their territory into trade networks connecting Iran, the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and beyond. Through its architecture, Selim reveals how the Armenian aristocracy engaged with global and imperial artistic languages, adopting and reinterpreting forms from Anatolia and Iran.

The shelter hall (*Fig. 26a*, on the left) features a three-nave layout, common to both Armenian basilicas and the Seljuk *hans* of Anatolia. The elevated *iwān* at the end of the central nave echoes Iranian architectural traditions.

The vestibule (*Fig. 26b*), built between 1326/7 and 1332 by Chesar Örbēlian, is the most ornate part of the complex. Its recessed entrance, crowned by a lunette with a Persian dedicatory inscription and framed by an arch, is surmounted by a prominent *muqarnas*—a

three-dimensional niche-like decoration resembling a honeycomb. The apotropaic reliefs of a sphinx and a bull rest above a string course with eight *muqarnas*-shaped niches. These stylistic references aligned the Örbēlians with the imperial visual culture set by the Seljuks and adopted by the Mongol Ilkhanate of Persia, projecting an image of legitimacy and connectedness.

One of the vestibule’s pyramidal skylights features a geometric motif found in other monuments linked to either Örbēlian patronage or the Jewish community of Yeghegis (*Fig. 26c*). Variants of this design appear more broadly, including in the Ulu Cami of Malatya (1273–74) and one of the Üç Kümbet mausolea in Erzurum.

The cultural hybridity of Selim is further expressed through its inscriptions—one in Persian and the other in Armenian (*Figs 26de*). Each addresses a different audience: the Persian text glorifies the Mongol ruler Abu Sa‘īd, while the Armenian inscription highlights the identity and piety of the local patrons. Together, they encode a dual political message: loyalty to the Ilkhanid state on the one hand, and the pursuit of local autonomy on the other. Thus, the Selim Caravanserai is not merely an example of hospitality architecture, but rather a stone document testifying to the co-existence of local and global powers that was made visible to the travellers of the Silk Road(s).

26a. Selim or Örbēlian Caravanserai, located on the Vardenis Pass, 14th century.

*Photographic credit: Leonardo Squilloni.*



26b. Façade of the vestibule, Selim or Ōrbēlian Caravanserai, 14th century.

*Photographic credit: Leonardo Squilloni.*

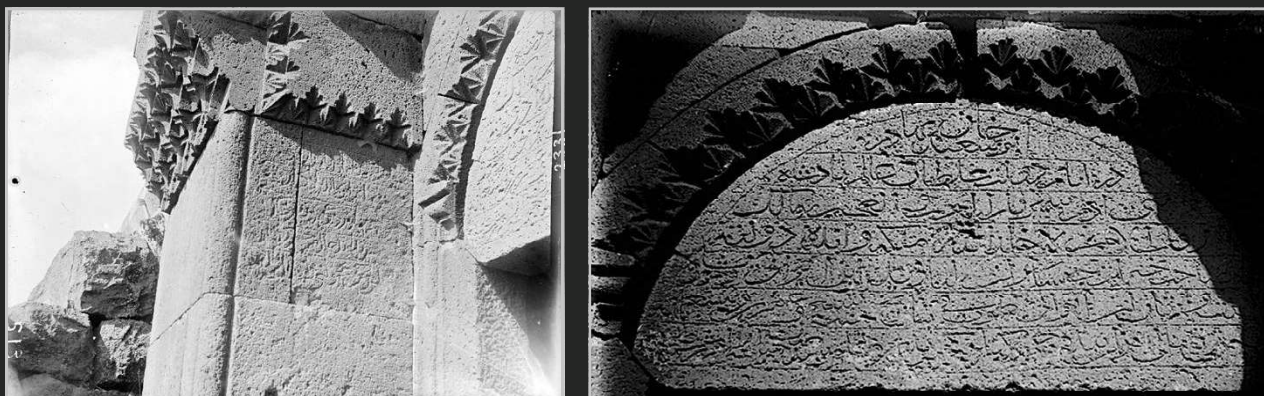
26c. Interlaced geometric patterns found in: Selim or Ōrbēlian caravanserai (a), Yeghegis Jewish cemetery (b), Yeghegis Ōrbēlian cemetery (c), Noravank' Monastery (d).

*Photographic credit: Leonardo Squilloni. Drawings: Caterina Fantoni.*



26d. Photographs showing the Persian dedicatory inscription on the entrance of the vestibule, Selim or Örbelian Caravanserai. Photographs by Anushavan Shiroyan, 1934.

Yerevan, History Museum of Armenia, Inv. nos. 2331 and 2332. Image credit: History Museum of Armenia.



26e. The Armenian dedicatory inscription on the vaulted ceiling of the vestibule, Selim or Örbelian Caravanserai.

Photographic credit: Leonardo Squilloni.





The catalogue presents 27 case studies that bear witness to cultural interactions in and around medieval Armenia. These testimonies come from multiple sources: small pieces of pottery and coins; majestic monuments and abandoned ruins; legendary narratives and visual arts; historiographical and juridical texts; lapidary inscriptions and handwritten manuscripts; and even tiny marginal notes that were intentionally erased in medieval times. Collectively, these sources and artefacts narrate a story of medieval Armenia and Armenians that spans a multitude of interconnections across Eurasia.

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