

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE DOME AS AN ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENT IN ARMENIAN MEDIEVAL MINIATURE PAINTING



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Abstract: *The article discusses the iconography of the dome as an architectural element in Armenian medieval manuscript illumination. The work aims to examine the features of depicting the architectural setting and its symbolic aspects and observe the types of dome-towers found in medieval ecclesiastical architecture. The study highlights how miniatures not only reflect the aesthetic views of the period but also serve as visual documentation of contemporary architectural practice. The key research task is to reveal, through comparative analysis with medieval Armenian churches, the interaction between artistic expression and architectural reality. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and religious context, which can be shaped by considering the depiction of domes in miniature painting as historical documents. The research offers insights into the synthesis of visual art and architecture in medieval Armenia and emphasizes the enduring significance of this unique cultural heritage. This research may serve as a guide for researchers studying the origins and formal development of the dome in Armenian medieval architecture.*

Keywords: *manuscript, illustration, divine images, symbol, composition, architectural setting, church, dome, structure.*

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Introduction

Miniature art had a unique place in medieval Armenian culture. Since the early Christian era, the manuscript has been regarded as a holy book. Therefore, master artists spared no effort to endow it with spiritual qualities. Over time, miniature art acquired a symbolic and mystical character, becoming a vehicle for conveying Christian ideas. The books were luxuriously illustrated to make theological knowledge more descriptive and accessible. In addition to floral, avian, and animal motifs, the artists depicted plants, rhythmically repeating geometric patterns, and architectural elements. Great importance was attached not only to ornaments but also to calligraphy [1].

In monasteries, various religious manuscripts were created in the scriptoriums adjacent to churches. Despite the massive destruction of manuscripts by different conquerors throughout the centuries, approximately thirty thousand manuscripts have been preserved in collections around the world. A significant part of them is kept at the "Matenadaran" Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, named after M. Mashtots, in Yerevan; a large number are also kept in the libraries of the St. James Patriarchate in Jerusalem and the Mekhitarist congregations in Venice and Vienna, as well as in other museums [2].

Many authors have presented comprehensive studies on Armenian medieval miniature art, revealing the rich artistic heritage of Armenian manuscripts. However, several art historians, while conducting detailed iconographic studies of miniature compositions and stylistic trends, have paid little attention to the depiction of the architectural setting. It is worth noting that the prominent Armenian historian A.Sh. Mnatsakanyan's work "The origin and ideological content of the main motifs" is a unique study of the significance of ornamentation in Armenian visual art and the architectural motifs depicted in miniatures. He also draws parallels with the analyses of the architect and theorist T. Toramanyan, which relate to architectural compositions and history.

This article focuses on the iconography of architectural elements in Armenian medieval miniature art. The study aims to uncover the principles behind the depiction of the dome.

The addressed issues are:

- the scarcity of research on architectural iconography in Armenian medieval miniatures,
- the artistic interpretation challenges in the depiction of domes in medieval miniatures.

By addressing these issues, the article aims to enhance the appreciation of Armenian medieval miniature art, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of its historical context.

The interconnection between architecture and miniature art is justified by the fact that in endless pictorial compositions, one can find architectural facts of significant importance. The numerous images of various architectural structures preserved in manuscripts contain abundant material for research related to both decoration and other architectural issues. Therefore, the unresolved questions of the origin and conceptual content of domes, towers, and architectural monuments in miniature art require new interpretations.

Materials and Methods

As is well known, in ecclesiastical environments, thrones, cathedras, and altars were made of wood, artistically designed, and usually decorated with chapel-like ornamental adornments. In essence, these were models of ancient temples, which were simultaneously incorporated into Christian structures and churches being built during the same period (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. *Decoration motif of a church-chapel*

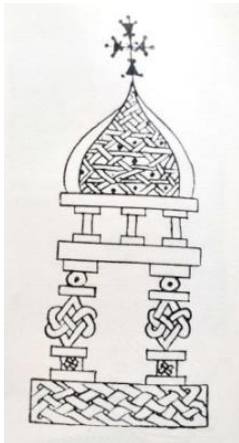


Fig. 2. *Ornamental painting of the church*

The manuscripts' diaries provide vast information on technologies, construction techniques, types of materials, and paint compositions. Artists worked with a variety of pigments, including tempera, natural pigments, plant-based adhesives, gold dust, and resin mixtures [2].

The rich miniature data confirms that medieval Armenian artists were not only engaged in calligraphy but also invested their efforts in architecture and sculpture, as they were originally designers. Based on their creative intentions, the masters depicted various forms of structures: stylized towers, pediments, columns, arches, and so on. Architectural elements in thematic paintings were conventional and often depicted schematically (Fig.2).

This research is carried out using iconographic and comparative analysis methods. The material includes scientific works on medieval miniature painting and architecture, along with diverse informational literature.

Results and Discussion

In the thematic compositions and decorative motifs of the manuscripts, artists consistently incorporated images of both secular and religious structures from their era, presenting both Armenian architectural elements and influences from other cultures (Figs. 3,4).

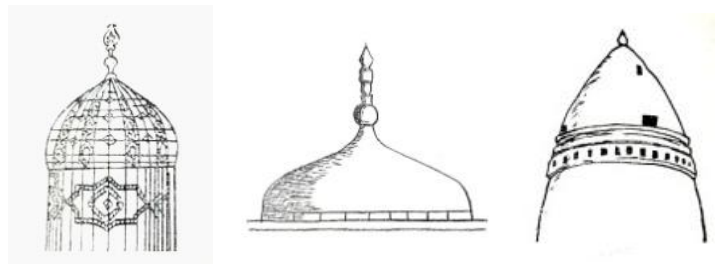


Fig. 3. *Types of mosque domes*

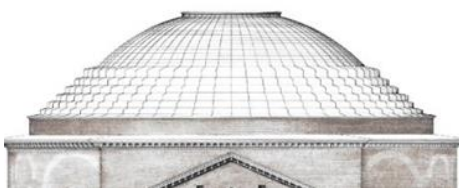


Fig. 4. *Dome of the Pantheon in Rome*

The composition and structure of the dome are of great interest. The word "dome" originates from the Latin "cupula" or "cupa" (meaning "cup"). It refers to the spatial covering of buildings. The dome is often shaped like a hemisphere or another surface formed by the rotation of a curve. Essentially, the dome is a vaulted roof or external arch placed on the top of a structure - often a hemispherical or spatial covering with different types of convexity.

Domes are mainly used to cover round, polygonal, or elliptical spaces, allowing large areas to be spanned without additional intermediate supports. This structural element is organized with upwards various convex curves.



Fig. 5. Dome of the Mother Cathedral of Etchmiadzin

In dome constructions, vertical load generates compressive forces and also horizontal thrust on the supports [3].

Having been part of ancient Armenian folk architecture, the dome reached its pinnacle in medieval Armenian church buildings, with the earliest known example being the Etchmiadzin Cathedral (301-303, reconstructed in 484 AD and 17th century) (Fig.5).

According to historian Agathangelos, in his vision, Gregory the Illuminator sees a dome rising on four pillars. The description serves as indirect evidence of the use of the dome. "On the crosses of four pillars, remarkable arches were connected to each other, and upon them, I saw a dome-shaped cube and a divine cloud-like structure" (Fig.6) [4].

The architectural form of the dome, as seen in ancient Armenian structures, serves as both a spiritual and cultural symbol. It represents the sanctified heavens - the celestial kingdom - and functions as a symbol of the Church's spiritual authority. This interpretation aligns with the observations of T. Toramanian regarding Armenian architecture, where he suggests that the tradition of dome construction may have roots in pre-Christian Armenian ritual practices. In one of his studies, he wrote: "There is a hidden traditional pre-Christian custom in Armenian dome construction, which was originally associated with worship but later transformed into a symbol in the Christian period" (Fig.7) [4].

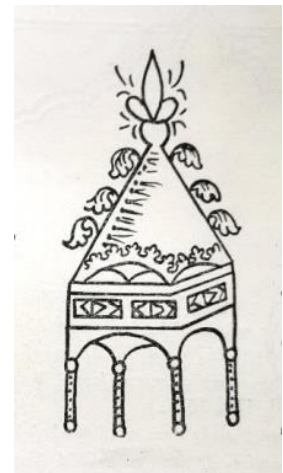


Fig. 6. Decoration motif of the dome

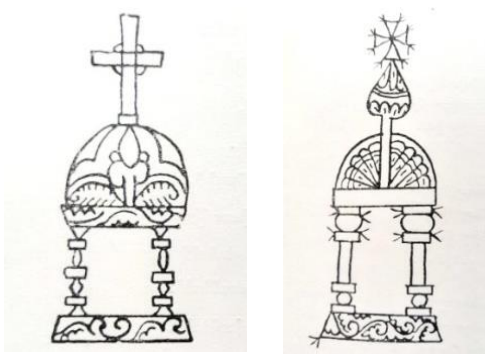


Fig. 7. Decorative paintings of the domes

Toramanian attempted to link the origin of the dome's structure to naturalistic meanings, reflecting the concept of Armenian mountains. He even emphasizes an example such as Mount Ararat. Although this argument is not fully substantiated, the author highlighted the cult nature of dome shapes and how Armenia's geography could influence architectural symbolism. Here, the dome can be viewed not only as an architectural form but also as a bridge between the sacred natural world and human-made structures, embodying both ritualistic and sacred values [5].

In miniatures, various types of temple - chapels are adorned with grain symbols. These are considered early representations of fertility-related rituals. The fruit-grain motif decorates the Christian cross, and the latter crowns the top of the dome. Miniature decorative paintings are filled with various types of chapels, columns, arches, domes, towers, the Tree of Life, floral and fruit combinations, and all architectural forms, as diagrams, are schematic (Figs. 6,8) [5]. As for the divine images, realistic dome constructions appear, with detailed descriptions.

Selected miniatures from Armenian medieval manuscript monuments are presented, particularly notable for their depictions of domes and arches.

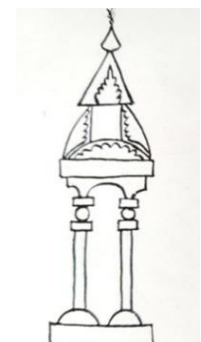


Fig. 8. Decorative painting of the chapel

Although the artists sought to depict scenes from the New Testament, they nonetheless reflected the architectural principles of their time in the portrayal of the environment. Thus, the presence of the temple is realistically emphasized in almost all manuscripts, particularly in the scene of the "Tyarnndarach".

According to ancient Mosaic religion, when a mother gave birth to a son, she was required to visit the temple forty days later to bless the newborn with holy fire and water. According to tradition, Mary and Joseph take the child to the temple for this ceremony. At that time, Simeon the Elder, upon seeing Jesus, realizes that He is the Savior and goes to meet them. This event gave rise to the "Tyarnndarach", which means "To go to meet the Lord"¹.

In the 11th-century manuscript of the *Gospel of Mughni*, the image of the temple is shown frontally, with antique Corinthian columns and an ornate arch design. In this depiction, the dome is shown schematically, which seems to suggest the entrance of the temple (Fig.9) [6].

In the 11th-14th centuries, the schools of miniature painting of Upper Armenia and Ani-Arsharunik developed in Mets Hayk (Great Armenia).

Cilician miniatures also stood out for their high artistic quality. Thanks to the craftsmanship of 12th-13th century artists, manuscript culture reached its peak. A key feature of Armenian miniatures was the richness of decorative motifs. The miniatures fully depict the rise of Armenian architecture and royal splendor, while the environment is portrayed with lively motion and secular depiction [2,7].

One of the prominent figures of the Cilician school is Toros Roslin. He created a number of luxurious manuscripts for the royal family and was the most realistic artist of his time. The talented painter depicted characters with human traits. Thanks to him, the first steps of the Renaissance were formed in Cilicia [2,8].

An outstanding example of Roslin's work is the *Malatya Gospel*, in which the decoration of the temple ceiling is presented in the *Tyarnndarach* scene (Fig.10) [9].

The tower has an upward-pointing conical shape and is supported by a flat surface, which is depicted as an oblique angle, creating the illusion of a square in the viewer's eye. The slender pillars supporting the sails are five in number and form an apparent pentagonal structure. It has a partially three-dimensional design, due to the light and shadow effects. The overall environment is laconic and expressive. As was customary in medieval painting, the composition is flat.

Another example of a dome can be found in another royal manuscript, the *94-22 Gospel*. There is no information about the author or the design of the book. Again, in the *Tyarnndarach* scene, an architectural structure is depicted. Although it is mostly flat and lacks volumetric development, the front view of the arch creates a delicate three-dimensional effect, emphasizing a sense of depth within the stylistic conventions of the medieval period. The drum resting on the sails is crowned with a dome. It can be assumed that this type of structure was widespread in Cilician church architecture, as there are numerous references to it in the manuscripts (Fig.11) [9].



Fig. 9. *Gospel of Mughni*, 11th century, Manuscript, No. 7736



Fig. 10. T. Roslin, 1268. *Malatya Gospel, Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Matenadaran, No. 10675*

¹ Kristonya Hayastan hanragitaran. Haykakan Hanragitaran hratarakchutyun POAK, Yerevan, 2002 (in Armenian). Available at: <https://surl.li/blzuew> (accessed on October 12, 2024).

In the XIII-XIV centuries, in Mets Hayk, a miniature school operated alongside the University of Gladzor. This school was more closely associated with monumental art (architecture, sculpture) than other schools of book art [10].

Toros Taroniatsi is a prominent representative of Gladzor. In the evangelical scenes, he depicted the environment in meticulous detail. In the *1318 Gospel*, in the *Tyarnndarach* scene, the dome is portrayed in a unique, realistic manner (Fig.12). The compositional layout is balanced. The artist attempted to address the perspective problem through the scale of

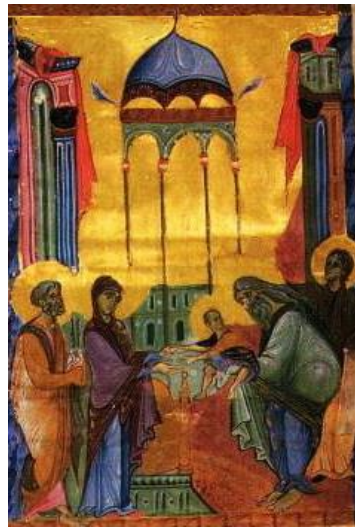


Fig. 11. 13th century, Gospel, Matenadaran, No. 9422



Fig. 12. Toros Taroniatsi, 1318, Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Matenadaran, No. 206

the architectural structure, as well as through linear and color contrasts. The dome is convex, and a curtain with folds hangs from inside, creating a sense of depth. The artist moves away from the flat depiction, providing a certain level of three-dimensionality through a stylized approach [2,6,10].

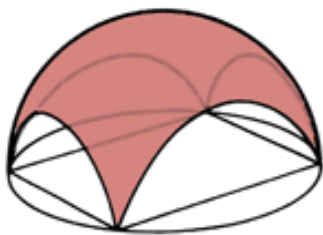


Fig. 13. Structure of the Dome

The miniature image can schematically be represented as follows. The dome is a protruding spherical structure that symmetrically descends with four sails and intersects at the same level of points on the same plane, creating volume and depth (Fig.13).

Domes with sails, also called "Byzantine domes", have a unique structure. The foundations do not merely form arches to hold the dome above, but they converge in the center, thus forming the dome. Such domes resemble a square sail, with the four corners anchored from below and expanded from beneath. A classic example is the dome of the Areni Church (Figs. 14,15) [3,11].

The tradition of Armenian miniature painting, through the depiction of religious scenes and architectural forms - especially domes, arches, and columns - not only reflects the ecclesiastical and cultural identity of medieval Armenia, but also its innovative artistic achievements.

The Vaspurakan school developed in the 12th-15th centuries. Miniature painting had a folk character and belonged to the genre art. Iconography was preferred with a graphic approach. The characteristic feature was the narrative, the presence of inscriptions within the image space, as well as the symbolic depiction [2,12].

Tserun Tsaghkogh is a representative of the school. His work includes the *Gospel of 1391*, in which the *Tyarnndarach* scene stands out for its simplistic portrayal. On a parchment-like paper background, three domed architectural forms appear, adorned with delicate decorative touches. The combination of a few restrained yet vibrant colors enlivens the scene (Fig.16).

The cone-shaped domes, with their broad, expansive bases, resemble clerical vestments, such as a klobuk or, at times, a stylized open parasol. They often appear in marginal decorations with architectural embellishments, in ornamental borders, headdresses, and, mainly, in divine images (Fig.17).



Fig. 14. Interior of the Dome



Fig. 15. The Church of Areni

An excellent example of a fan-shaped structure is the dome of Saint Stepanos Monastery's main church on Mount Magharda from the 9th century (Fig.18) [5,13].

In another illustration, structures with rhythmically repeating domed towers create the impression of a monastic complex (Fig.19).

The presence of multiple domes suggests the number of churches - a common architectural feature in medieval Armenian monastic complexes, where it was customary to build two or three churches along with chapels and other functional buildings (Fig.20) [11,13].

Over centuries, each school of miniature art and master craftsman contributed to the creation of a distinct Armenian visual language, bridging the sacred and the secular, the architectural and the pictorial.

Conclusion

The research highlights the various forms of domes depicted in Armenian miniature art and compares them with medieval architectural forms. Armenian medieval miniature iconography is canonical, following established conventions. Thematic scenes often employ reversed perspective, giving the space an illusory character. The miniatures have a symbolic nature, as they are laden with mysterious and conceptual motifs. A distinctive feature of these images is the emphasis on flatness and contours, which is typical of Armenian medieval aesthetics.

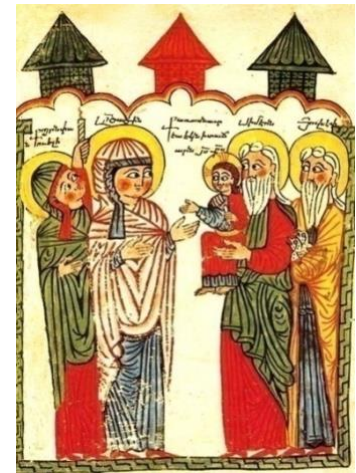


Fig. 16. Tserun, 1391 Gospel, *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Matenadaran, No. 8772*



Fig. 17. *Decorative Motif of the Dome*

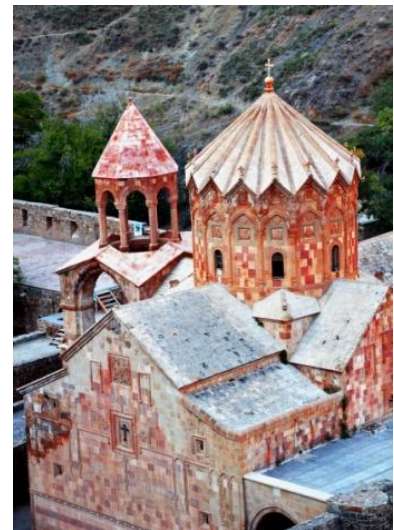


Fig. 18. Maghardavank, 9th century, *Church Dome*

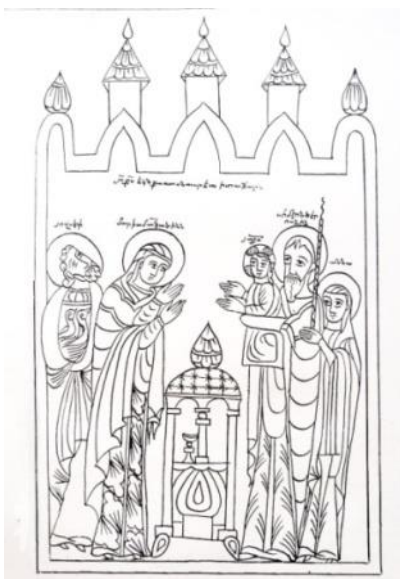


Fig. 19. *Gospel, Schematic Image, No. 8772*

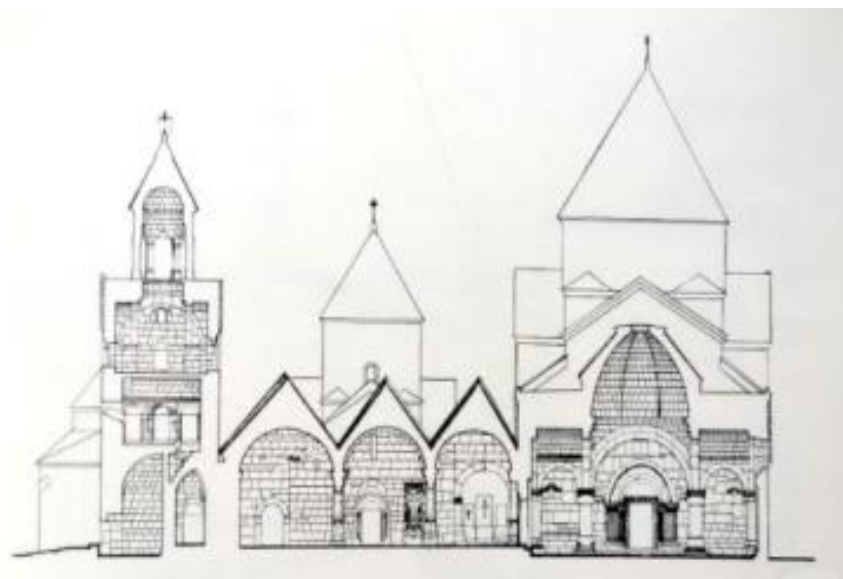


Fig. 20. *Monastery with several churches (Sanahin)*

The analytical work leads to the following conclusions:

- Apart from their artistic value, Armenian manuscripts provide rich ethnographic material about the medieval culture of the Armenian people. In many ways, they serve as a key to uncovering the aesthetic views and artistic perceptions of the time.
- The miniatures depict architectural structures with a flat-plane layout and stylized decorative embellishments. This choice of stylization allows the architectural forms and narrative elements to maintain a captivating simplicity while ensuring visual clarity and compositional balance.

The flat yet dynamic architectural depictions in the miniatures continue to be objects of interest, representing both the material and spiritual heritage of Armenia, inviting ongoing scientific engagement.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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