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VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IN ARMENIA, FROM TRAVELERS' ACCOUNTS, IN THE WESTERN CONTEXT, FROM THE 17th CENTURY TO THE PRESENT DAY

The corpus of accounts by European travelers who visited Armenia (Fig. 1), *extracted from A. Marouti's research, as well as various writings by authors - Armenian architects during the Russian then Soviet period - will serve as a starting point for this research. Its objective is to put two questions in parallel: what consideration of vernacular constructions as genuine architectures in Armenia; and how this interest is situated about these architectures in the West. Using the Timelines tool, a chronological comparison ("side by side" in French) allows us to identify Soghomon Vardanian as a precursor to the recognition of the vernacular.*

Keywords: travelers' accounts, popular constructions, architectural heritage, Armenian vernacular legacy, cultural landscape.

Fig. 1. *Yerevan by Jean Chardin, Voyages of Monsieur le Chevalier Chardin in Persia and other places in the East, Amsterdam, Jean-Louis de Lorme, 1711 (available on googlebooks)*

1. The popular constructions put in the background in the literature on Armenian architecture

Introduction

The objective of the *research-transformation* [1] that I initiated in favor of earthen architectures in Armenia is to reactivate interest in these constructions by trying to transform the way people look at this ancestral material, in Armenia, but also in France [2]. Knowing that this type of construction is experiencing a resurgence of interest in Europe and all over the world, in particular in the current context of the Anthropocene and ecological requirements - as evidenced by French experiences, for example: that of architect C. Vergély in the Confluence district of Lyon[1] or the project of the Joly et Loiret agency in Ivry, near Paris[2].

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[1] https://www.batiweb.com/actualites/eco-construction/le-pise-ce-materiau-ancien-aux-normes-ecologiques-modernes-2019-05-03-34583

[2] https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2018/07/05/construction-le-retour-a-la-terre-tente-les-villes_5326293_3244.html

One of the starting questions of the research is to understand why - by what means - the legacy of earthen architectures built in Armenia is so devalued until today? A. Marouti's thesis defended at the Politecnico di Milano - *Preservation of the architectural heritage of Armenia: a history of its evolution from the perspective of the early 19th century European travelers to the scientific preservation of the soviet period* [3] - is interesting to this point of view, because it brings together a historical panorama of the consideration - and conservation - of architectural heritage in the Republic of Armenia. In contrast, it also makes it possible to note that vernacular productions are still far from being considered as real heritages in contemporary discourses on architecture. On the other hand, his research does not make it possible to construct a global and synthetic representation of these processes of recognition and conservation.

Interests, criticisms of Marouti's thesis on the preservation of Armenian architectural heritages

A. Marouti's thesis covers three periods: starting from the descriptive accounts of the first European travelers until the end of the 19th century, it then shows the awareness of the *identity* of Armenian architecture, at the beginning of the 20th century - within particular the works of N. Marr, T. Toramanyan and J. Strzygowski; to finally describe all the conservation devices of the 20th century during the Soviet period. The choice to start from the accounts of European travelers to understand this taking into account seems relevant to us in several respects. Indeed, often the Armenian elites have been trained in Europe or have been influenced by European education [4]; on the other hand, the European representations of the Caucasus - having served as a basis for their formation - were constructed from an ethnocentric Western culture. Considered by current researchers as linked to the concept of *Orientalism*, this knowledge of the Orient has been strengthened year after year, based on cultural a priori and Manichaean visions, sometimes paradoxical as shown for example by D. Vinson [5].

In section III, A. Marouti concentrates more particularly on a period *between* the travelers' accounts and the well-documented academic studies that will follow, targeting the works of Marr, Toramanyan, and Strzygowski. This is indeed a *pivotal* period in the history of taking into account the Armenian architectural heritage - geographically, culturally, and historically *central*: after the Russo-Ottoman wars (1830), before the Russian revolution of 1917, and the closing of the Soviet Union, and before the 1915 genocide. Thus, between the three empires: Ottoman, Russian and Persian, in the breach of this territory which still allows fairly free movement, people who can exchange studies, research, surveys, meet in Armenia, in the between [6] of both European and Middle Eastern cultures. These views, both inside and outside of Armenia, are valuable and irreplaceable; it will be necessary to wait until the 1970s, in particular with Italian contributions - as A. Marouti underlines in section IV [3, p.174], to find such a fruitful international configuration. Finally, it highlights the importance and impact of J. Strzygowsky's theses on the European scene - thus opening up the scientific debate on the Armenian origins of Romanesque and Gothic architecture in Europe...

On the other hand, other aspects - which we consider equally important - are left in the background by A. Marouti. In Section V, *Awareness and architectural preservation in soviet Armenia*, he notes that S. Vardanyan emphasizes the need for a systematic study of Armenian folk dwellings before they completely disappear: "[…] *architectural theorists in Western countries have limited their studies to monumental, religious and secular buildings and have not addressed the architectural evolution of the homes of ordinary people*" [7, p.6]. However, in 2018, A. Marouti devotes only three pages of section V to this issue of popular architectures - *Attention to folk architecture in soviet Armenia* - and two other pages in Section I. By thus putting popular legacies in the background, he continues, in fact, consciously or not, the Western travelers' attitude denounced by S. Vardanyan as early as the 1930s.

A paradoxical presupposition

In the chapter, *The architecture of village house,* concerning the analysis of travelers' accounts, A. Marouti speaks in pejorative terms of "*low-quality materials*" [3, pp. 33, 37]; while he quotes some travelers who had already spotted in these architectures and these materials, which currently constitute the qualities and assets of sustainable development: local bio sourced materials, with interesting thermal inertia and therefore more economical [8]… He understands well that the popular habitats are in poor condition due to lack of maintenance because Armenia has been for centuries the territory of wars between three great Empires – Ottoman, Persians and Russians [3, pp. 37, 87].

But, he takes sides with the stone material - is it because it is a *habitus?* - and it is *agreed* to think - implicitly - that it is a more solid and therefore more durable material; "*Despite the abundance of stone, the basic construction material was earth and mud for the walls and timber for the roofs*" [3, pp. 34, 93]. However, this question is not addressed - and yet deserves to be asked again: why this choice to build with earth when there was the presence of the stone resource ("*stones were reserved for water features and paving streets*" reports S. Vardanyan in his study of popular architectures [7])? The last part of A. Marouti's thesis is entirely devoted to the conservation processes of the Soviet era and mainly talks about monuments.

In his research - the title of which is, let us recall, *Preservation of the architectural heritage of Armenia* - does A. Marouti *implicitly* side with architects who consider *ordinary constructions* as not (yet) being *architectures having value*? At no time does he specify that he will only develop the "scholarly architecture" component. His research finally provides little information on the processes of preservation of popular constructions in Armenia: certainly, because during the Soviet era and until now, there has been very little conservation of these modest architectures - already because of a vast corpus of monuments to be restored - but also probably due to the low esteem that the author attributes to them...

Today, this pushing into the background of Armenian domestic architecture (*ordinary*) and the implicit refusal to recognize it also as a valuable *legacy* - to become *heritage* - is all the more problematic as other architects or historians, such as R. Aghababyan [9] or V. Haroutounyan [10], for example - following Vardanyan - underlined their importance by showing the relationship between the traditional *glkhatun* house (*Glkhatun/ Գլխատուն: glukh/ գլուխ* - head, and *tun/ տուն* - house [11]) and domes of monumental Armenian buildings, religious (churches, monasteries) or lay (palace).

This filiation should therefore be reconsidered with regard to the theses of T. Toramanyan [12] and J. Strzygowski [13] who undertook to show that Armenian architecture is at the origin of Romanesque and Gothic architecture in Europe. Even though these assumptions are still sometimes discussed today, to continue the reasoning on the filiation "traditional house-Armenian religious heritage" would mean that the popular Armenian house *glkhatun* can constitute one of the origins of monumental European religious architectures too...

Reconsidering popular constructions, a renewed line of research in Armenia

Most of the research that puts popular legacies in the background – because they are considered *ordinary*, minor, or fragile and unsustainable, associated with poverty, etc. - in fact, ignores 90% of constructions! G. Casnati's lecture taken from the *Heritage on Earth* symposium in Yerevan in 2015 perfectly describes the current Armenian situation:

For various reasons, it is above all the medieval religious architectural heritage that has been brought to the attention of researchers and tourists who, each year, more numerous, visit Armenia. The rich archaeological heritage, the remains of the fortresses, the works of vernacular and modern architecture are still very little considered and neither preserved nor valued. When they are of high quality and present particular, interesting, and singular aspects, they should be objects of study and, if properly highlighted, could play a very important role in the development of tourism. Unfortunately, their value is still unknown [...]. The raw earth constructions, of which we find in Armenia some examples of almost all ages are abandoned or destroyed either because of the difficulty of the restoration or because of the low value attributed [14].

There is therefore still a lot of work to be done to collect, complete, make known this *corpus of ordinary constructions…*, in Armenia and in the neighboring countries: on the ground, for what still exists, and through books. This is what architects devoted themselves to very early on – Vardanyan then H. Khalpakhchyan [15] or N. Papukhyan [16], etc. It is with a similar intention that our research undertook to raise awareness of earthen constructions to transform this view of *popular architecture*. In the next part, we propose to establish and trace the evolution of this awareness in Armenia - its actors, their interactions - starting from the travelers' accounts.

2. Emergence of the notion of vernacular in Armenia and method of putting in *vis-à-vis* with timelines

Emergence of the notion of vernacular architecture and methodology

At first, we will follow the same strategy as A. Marouti, by selecting what concerns this *other corpus* - what is now called *vernacular architecture*. We will trace the evolution of its consideration in the specific case of Armenia, in order to highlight the different actors in the progress of research to better understand their disciplinary affiliations, their interactions, but also the evolution of ideas, of their objectives, to show the awareness of the issues measured by these different actors. Our approach will therefore seek to show why, when, and how certain Armenian architects or historians favored *ordinary constructions* and through what type of commitment: notably with studies and surveys, but also militant texts. These commitments are certainly consistent with the values and ideology of the Soviet period for the special attention and valorization of the popular, the ordinary.

But as we have seen, the influences were wider, European and even Western. It is therefore necessary to situate this local Armenian context in the general context of the evolution of these ideas in the West - Europe / USA to be able to evaluate and show to what extent certain Armenian architects understood the importance of popular constructions relatively early on and at the same time to observe that these avant-garde approaches are - if not forgotten, at least - currently hidden.

The objective is therefore to represent the international panorama of the emergence of this awareness by identifying, first of all, the pioneers who contributed to the establishment of the problem of the vernacular. We will then discuss the birth and establishment of the semantic field because vocabularies vary according to points of view and cultures. We will end by showing the involvement of international bodies and public institutions for the protection of these heritages.

Commitments for the popular, for what issues?

It is easy to understand that the reasons for which this particular interest in *ordinary architectures* has developed have evolved over time. But it is necessary to clearly distinguish between the various repercussions and therefore to measure the importance of the consequences of these awareness-raisings. This lucidity on the different categories of issues will thus be a decisive criterion for reporting on these developments. For example, the historical curiosity of the first American antiquarians - who began by studying certain objects as indicative legacies of particular cultures - cannot be put on the same level as a conservation strategy for samples of remarkable constructions - in order to turn into *heritage*[3]; or at the same level as a *militant commitment* to better reveal the *origins* of architecture. In Armenia in particular, for some architects, popular and modest constructions make it possible to understand the evolution - the DNA - the *germ* of monumental architectures [7, p.6] whereas today a current user will only have esteem for *modern* constructions, as O. Aurenche observes [17].

Finally, reconsidering the vernacular as a *resource* for future architectural and landscape developments is yet another step in this process (Fig. 2).
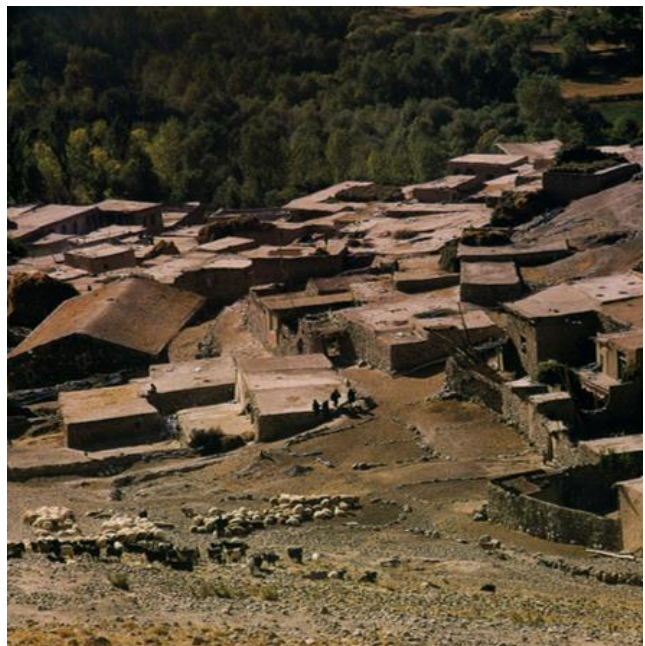

Fig. 2. *Local resources form the vernacular landscapes characteristic of their cultures: Village Muzhumbar, 17th c. (now Iran), cf. "Documenti di Architettura Armena" collection, Politecnico di Milano, n° 20 (Sorhul)*

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[3] V. Veschambre, Le processus de patrimonialisation: revalorisation, appropriation et marquage de l'espace. Les Cafés géographiques, 2007. *http://cafe-geo.net/wp-content/uploads/processus-patrimonialisation.pdf*
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This was the theme of the last ICOMOS CIAV & ISCEAH symposium in Pingyao (China) in 2019: revitalizing territories based on material and immaterial cultures, landscapes, know-how, resources, social dynamics [1]…

We pursue the reasoning even further by recognizing vernacular productions as a real *resource* (lesson) for innovation[4]. For some, this is even becoming a global issue and the only hope for fostering a dialogue of cultures and fighting against the impoverishment due to globalization, as argued by F. Jullien in *Le pont des singes* [18].

References and graphical representation tool

For the part concerning Armenian architecture, A. Marouti's work remains the main reference used in this article (even if it essentially targets monumental buildings), because it also mentions the important testimonies on popular constructions. For the western part, we will also rely on M.-F. Bisson's research who questions as follows: *can ordinary modern architectures be considered vernacular* [19]? Even if its objective is different, its study shows how slowly this attention in favor of the vernacular was built, in successive stages, particularly in two territories: French and Anglo-Saxon.

To visually synthesize these different historical data and to contextualize the development of this awareness, we propose to bring together the salient events by means of *timelines*. Two facing friezes - Armenia/West - highlight the interrelationships *between* these two cultures. This open tool - because it can be supplemented at any time - constitutes a sort of library that allows for research to be established, with interdisciplinary contributions [20]. Finally, their modular design allows certain events or processes to be graphically characterized as a posteriori. The chosen tool is free French software *Frisechrono*, used in particular by teachers[5].

Graphic codes of timelines (Figures 3, 4).

The first timeline (Fig. 3) concerning Armenia itself presents a setting in vis-à-vis two types of information:

☐ Below the time scale:
  - The periods of wars - culminating in a peace treaty - are marked by bands of different colors: Persians against Ottomans in *pink*; Russians versus Persians in *orange*.
  - Iranian occupation is in *dark blue*, Ottoman occupation in *olive green*, Russian occupation in *light blue*. Note that the occupations of Armenian territory by Russia in the 19th provide a better understanding of the increase in European travelers to Armenia.

☐ Above the time scale are gathered the various publications, read by Armenian intellectuals:
  - The accounts of European travelers concerning Armenia (thumbnail with image: French travelers are in *red*; English - in *blue-green*; German - in *sky blue*).
  - Then follow (in *green*) the 3 key authors - Marr, Strzygowski, Toramanyan, - they initiate the consideration of the Armenian architectural heritage and have theorized the contributions of Armenian architecture to European architecture.
  - And finally (in *purple*) - from the beginning of the 20th century - the Armenian authors of the Soviet period: these are the pioneers, who, by producing field studies, draw attention to *popular architecture,* to introduce the *vernacular* and make it known, by showing its richness and its qualities.

Why do we place Western travelers on the timeline that concerns Armenia? Their talk is that of Westerners speaking to Westerners, but they have been read and have influenced Armenian and Russian intellectuals. Above all, they travelled to Armenia and tell about Armenia, these are the stories of travelers only; then they are followed by Marr, Strzygowski, and Toramanyan who theorized from and on Armenian architecture.

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[4] http://www.vegetal-e.com/fr/technique-vernaculaire-pour-architecture-innovante_218.html.
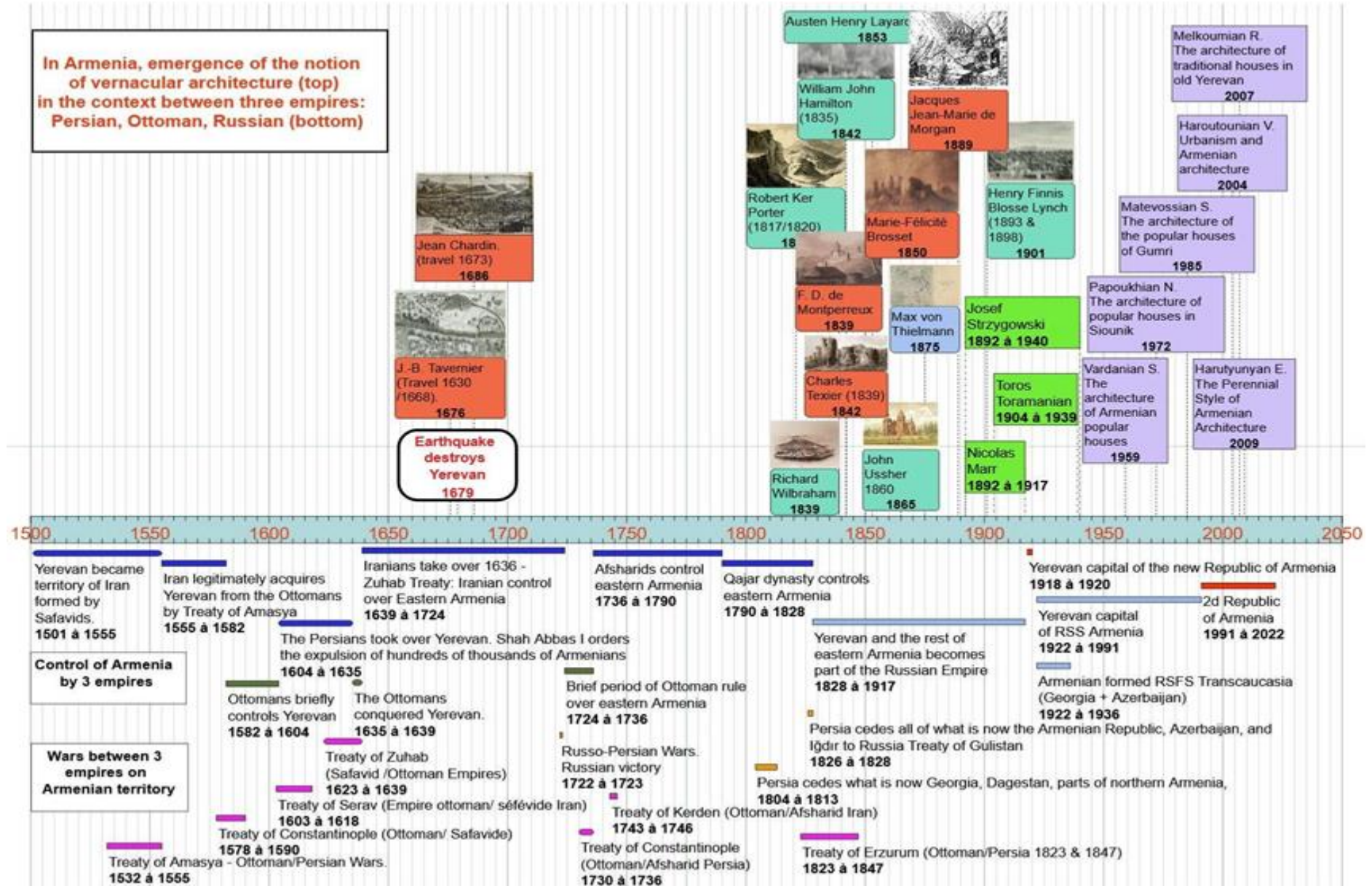[5] http://frisechronos.fr/

Fig. 3. *In Arménia, emergence of the notion of vernacular architecture (top) in the context between three empires: Persian, Ottoman, Russian (bottom)*
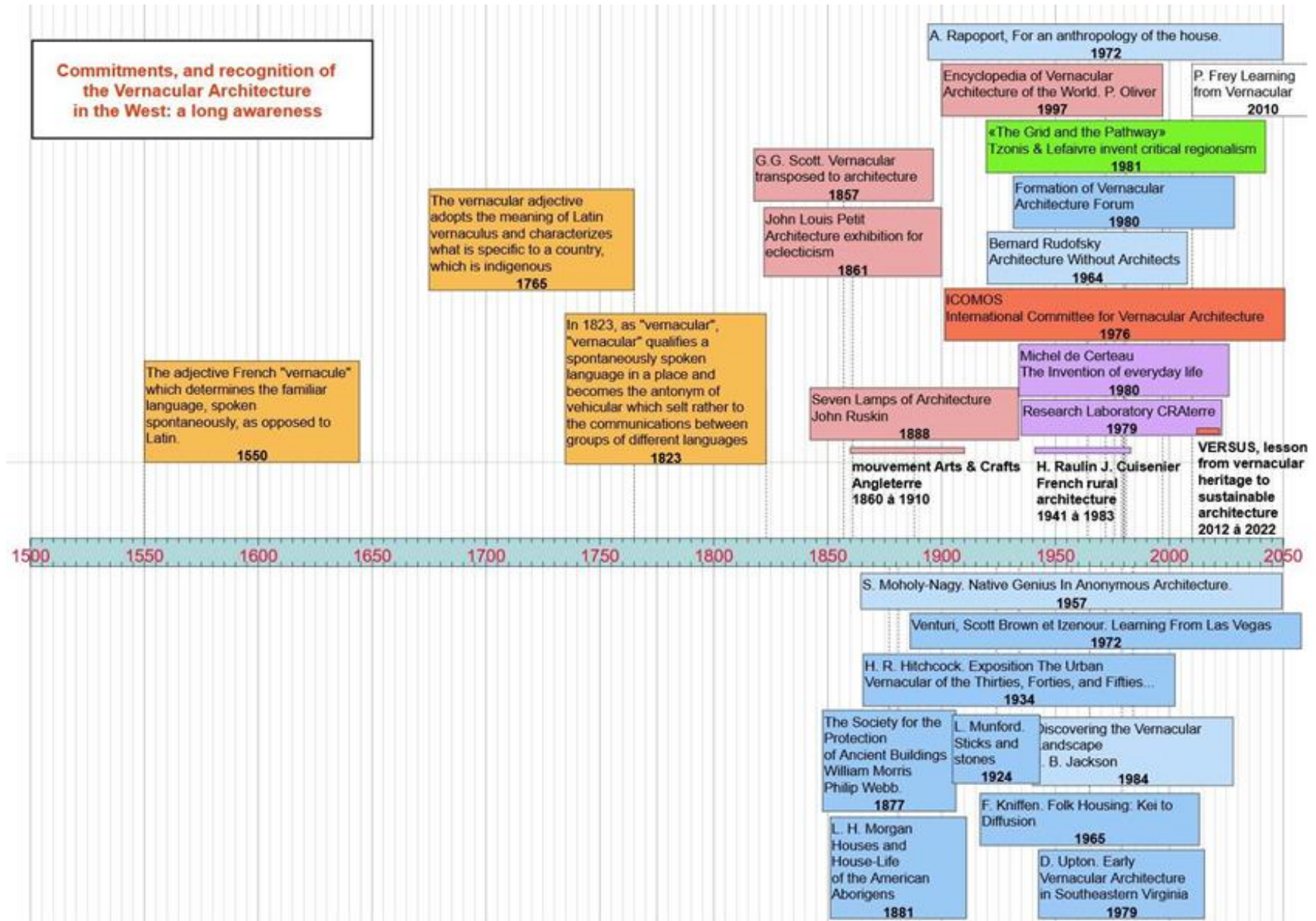
Fig. 4. Commitments and recognition of Vernacular Architecture in the West: a long awareness

3. Recent interest in the vernacular in the West

For the Western part, the timeline (Fig. 4) separates the Europeans (at the top of the time scale) and the US (at the bottom). We will distinguish with different colors: French in *purple*, Anglo-Saxon in *pink*, American in *blue* (*light blue* for foreigners residing in the US), Greek in *green*, and Swiss in *white*. Two significant events in red: creation of ICOMOS CIAV (1976) and ISCEAH (1987) and the VERSUS project. The Russians' contributions to this theme of the vernacular remain to be studied.

Western - Anglo-Saxon context: the emergence of the concept of "vernacular"

M.-F. Bisson's research brings together the salient events of this awareness and also shows all the interplay of actors, in interaction with the *culture* of the different periods and their influences. It is not possible to report on them here in an exhaustive manner: we have selected the notable advances.

The *vernacular* word was not used for architecture until 1857, first in England: for the first time in the Oxford dictionary by the Englishman G.G. Scott [21] who contrasted it with monumental. Previously - as early as 1823 in France - the *vernacular* term was already used, but mainly for language (as opposed to *vehicular* language). As early as 1861, during an exhibition, the Reverend J.L. Petit (Fig. 5) campaigned for *eclecticism* in architecture - understood as the marriage of the *monumental* and the *vernacular* - taking up the principles (and not only the look as for the *neo-Gothic*) of houses built by ordinary men (medieval constructions) as the basis of the architecture: "*the harmony of a building stemming […] from the designer's respect for the community, the place, and the available materials*"! Architecture is therefore "*no longer just a matter of temples and churches* [but] *must embrace all genres, including domestic architecture*" [22].

Fig. 5. *Reverend J. L. Petit, in the 1860s.* *http://revpetit.com/*

Then, the *Art and Craft* movement - still in England - militates for a return to *traditional* architecture (in particular Ruskin 1888 [23]), which can be understood - as a reaction - in the country where the beginnings of modern, industrial society and globalization were born. But, it is also a lot in the USA that architects are beginning to take an interest in *domestic - folk -* dwellings, probably also because it is a new country that is being built without really having roots and its own history. Upton's synthesis work on this subject (1979) [24] is a privileged reference, let us retain some important previous events: Morgan published *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigens* in 1881; Morris and Web founded the *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* in 1877; and the historian Hitchcoch organized an exhibition on the vernacular in 1934, etc.

Commitments and recognition of the "vernacular" in architecture

It was really in 1957 that a woman - Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (Fig. 6), of Hungarian origin but of German nationality, all her family emigrated to London in 1935 then to the United States in 1937, due to the rise of Nazism - art and architecture historian, recognizes the value of *vernacular production* as more essential than what is usually considered *architecture*, in a seminal and manifest work, *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture* [25] .

It is not insignificant that it is a woman who militates for this commitment for a return to *domestic* foundations - local materials and knowledge, location according to the site, creation of a private space... - and for the development of an anonymous daily life! It is also revealing that in 2019, the Wikipedia article dedicated to her only existed in two languages, German and English. Although she offers a - premonitory -

approach to architecture that respects the environment according to current criteria, it is not Sibyl who will be truly recognized (!); it is the Austrian-American B. Rudofsky who will make an impression and who will be remembered: with the exhibition at the MoMA in New York and the eponymous book *Architecture without architect* [26] in 1964!

It is only from these dates that we can consider these Western commitments comparable to that of Armenian architects - including S.Vardanyan (Fig. 7), in Soviet Armenia, who, already a few decades earlier, was already carrying out surveys in the Armenian countryside and was reconsidering vernacular constructions by campaigning for them to be recognized as true architecture. We will come back to this avant-garde figure in the conclusion.

Fig. 6. *Sibylle Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (born Pietzsch) in 1927. Wikipedia*

Because it will be necessary to wait a few more years for more precise publications to structure this interest in the *domestic* and the *ordinary* [27, 28]. Indeed, it was not until 1976 that ICOMOS formed a section *Commission For Vernacular Architecture, CIAV*[6] and in 1997 a British Paul Oliver published the first encyclopedia of the vernacular in the world, in 3 volumes [29]. We should also point out that in France - with the favorable role played by rural anthropologists and geographers in the middle of the 20th century - there is a collection on French rural architecture classified by region, complete and of great interest: it was published in 1964, following multidisciplinary research and surveys carried out from 1941 to 1948 [30].

The vernacular as a resource

If we can consider that in the United States, S. Moholy-Nagy already understood the vernacular as a *resource*, in Europe, in this perspective, a second important step was taken with an article published in 1981 by two Greek teachers. In *The grid and the path* [31], A. Tzonis and L. Lefaivre put forward the founding notion of *Critical Regionalism*. It is this concept that will inspire K. Frampton's essay in 1983 - *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points of architecture of resistance* [32]. *Critical regionalism* is not simply *regionalism* [33] which takes up - by imitating - the forms of the past; but an approach to architecture which above all takes up the principles of the vernacular and thus makes it possible to establish a creative mediation between the two styles of architecture: on the one hand modern, contemporary and international; on the other local and traditional.

Finally, it should be noted that the current French laboratory CRAterre (Research center intended to promote raw earth architecture in the world and created in 1979) participated in the *VERSUS* research project [34], led by five European laboratories: Italian, Spanish, Belgian, Portuguese and French. This project proposes a qualitative analysis grid that makes it possible to evaluate a contemporary construction from 15 criteria and to see to what extent a contemporary architecture meets the environmental, socio-economic requirements, etc., according to the "model" of local traditional architectures - *vernacular*. But we can also consider this evaluation tool as a lever for innovation if only by the richness of the debates it generates within the design groups. In 2014, with *VERSUS*, an additional step was taken in this reconsideration of the vernacular and its recognition as a real resource for the sustainable development of human settlements.

The culmination of a long awareness: the vernacular landscape

Thus, from the 1980s, there are many more publications on the vernacular: it has become almost a must, even if differences in definitions and meaning of the word still remain between *ordinary*, *domestic*, *indigenous*, *rural*, *folk*, *local*, *traditional*, *secondary*, etc. [35]. Besides, is an exact definition of the *vernacular* necessary?

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[6] C. Machat, The History of CIAV. https://www.icomos.org/publications/vernacular3.pdf

Can we not be satisfied with an indefiniteness of the vernacular as some claim an indefiniteness of architecture [36]?! Nevertheless, there are still a few last steps to mention in order to finish sketching what seems to be the culmination of a slow taking into account the vernacular. A final key contribution is certainly that of the American J. B. Jackson who broadened the notion of vernacular to landscape in 1984, with *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* [37]. This concept of the *vernacular landscape* makes it possible to understand the interrelation between architectures and their environments - an ecosystem where architecture draws its resources from its environment while transforming it.

Finally, during the last "ICOMOS CIAV and ISCEAH" 2019 symposium in Pingyao, in China, the work of the speakers had all integrated the landscape as an essential element of vernacular human settlement and as a lever for the revitalization of local territories. As the president of ICOMOS-ISCEAH - Mariana Correia - reminded in her introductory lecture, it is a global consideration that is necessary, "*A cultural landscape is remarkable due to associations between, architecture, people and landscape*" [38]. We are currently moving towards an understanding and a global consideration of local cultures understood as *ecosystems*, where the different components of life are balanced in harmony with a *milieu* – a *fûdo* in the sense of the Japanese philosopher T. Watsuji [39] - notion reintroduced in France by A. Berque. This understanding also renews the view of the European travelers' accounts in Armenia, who often spontaneously describe and/or draw human settlements in the landscapes thus built by men over time - such as, for example, the Armenia's irrigation networks described by F. DuBois de Montperreux [40].

Conclusion: S. Vardanyan, already a precursor in Armenia USSR (Fig. 7)

Thanks to this chronological synthesis and with this confrontation between East and West, we can see that taking into account the vernacular is relatively late in Europe. In fact, forms of militant engagement are earlier: first with architects in Armenia, then with a historian in the USA. Our study makes it possible in particular to bring together two geographically and culturally distant researchers: - S. Vardanyan, who published his work on popular architecture in 1959 in the Armenian SSR, but who conducted his work (surveys and interviews) in the field from the 1930s; - and S. Moholy-Nagy who published her work in 1957 and began her research in 1952, thanks to a scholarship granted by the Architectural League of New York [41]. These two *committed* and *militant* paths can be related: both were forced to flee genocide, to acquire a double or even triple culture and their work has remained somewhat in the shadows. They also deserve to be rediscovered and valued.

In Armenia, finally, even if T. Toramanyan punctually brings testimonies on popular know-how (for example for traditional houses and the construction of floors and ceilings in earth and wood [42, 43]); this remains

Fig. 7. *Soghomon Vardanyan, 1950s:born in Erzeroum (Karin in Armenian) present-day Turkey (1903-1970), architect graduated from the Polytechnic School of Yerevan in 1936.*

marginal in his work, mainly focused on monumental architecture - which is consistent at the beginning of the 20th century, where Armenian culture is threatened with extinction, particularly following the 1915 genocide. It was therefore S. Vardanyan who first campaigned for *popular architectures* considered ordinary, minor or regional, etc. And he put forward a thesis that can be considered avant-garde: popular architecture is the *germ* of monumental architectures - which, following processes of heritage, are currently recognized: it is their origin and also deserves a revaluation.

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