

Observations on St Hripsimē

In an article of 1971 and an earlier monograph A.B. Eremian sought to connect the church of St Hripsimē, Vaġaršapat, to Byzantinizing trends in seventh century Armenia¹. Built by the catholicos Komitas in the year 618 to commemorate one of the founders of Armenian Christianity, this church is one of the finest examples of the early flowering of Armenian architecture. Eremian, focusing on the introduction of three windows in the apse, alleged connections with the Chalcedonian tendencies of the Armenian church in the seventh century.

To summarize her argument, Eremian points out what T'oromanian had observed before her, namely that the earliest Armenian churches generally had only a single window in the apse. In the year 632, however, the catholicos Ezer, bowing to Byzantine pressure, subscribed to the Chalcedonian creed. The new Greek allegiance of the hierarchy, Eremian maintained, was displayed in churches after that date by introducing three windows in the apse after the pattern of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. When it was completed in 618, according to Eremian, St Hripsimē had only a single window in the apse; the change from one to three windows must have been effected after 632 and it should be interpreted as reflecting the temporary alliance of Armenia with the Chalcedonian creed.

Unfortunately this thesis encounters a number of difficulties. In the first place it should be pointed out that the apse of Hagia Sophia contains not three but six windows, in two rows of three. Secondly, while three windows are common in Byzantium, a Chalcedonian symbolism seems unlikely, since the Chalcedonian debate revolved not around the number three, as in the Trinity, but the number two, as in the natures of Christ. But the most serious problem is that of the archaeology of St Hripsimē, in which an excessive number of hypotheses have been loaded on scanty reporting of the evidence. Perhaps a few observations can contribute to a closer archaeological study of the monument.

The only reliable plan of St Hripsimē remains that of T'oromanian used by Strzygowski; subsequent

studies have usually adapted the plan by eliminating minor irregularities (pl. 1071)². It was the observation of irregularities that suggested to Eremian that the east apse was re-built after 632, for it projects 18-20 cm beyond the line of the flanking corner chambers³. But Eremian here makes an elementary error in supposing that inconsistencies in measurement imply separate phases in construction. In St Hripsimē, corresponding features in the plan hardly ever match in measurements. The south wall is more than a half meter longer than the north wall (22.87 against 22.34 m), and the dimensions and positions of windows, doors, apses, and niches vary throughout the church, sometimes by more than a meter. If every irregularity represented a separate building phase, we would have to imagine a veritable jig-saw puzzle of dozens of phases.

Changes in masonry are a much better index of successive building phases. On the east side of St Hripsimē the masonry below the windows is lighter in color and smoother in finish than the masonry in the window zone; and the same lighter and smoother stone can be observed in the gable and the courses below the roof line (pl. 1082,3). Evidently during some period of neglect the neatly cut revetment stones were being quarried from the monument in those areas where they were easiest to get at. Eremian dates the restored masonry here to the catholicos P'ilippos in 1653⁴. The continuity of masonry in the middle

1. A.B. Eremian, Sur certaines modifications subies par les monuments arméniennes au VII^e siècle, *REArm*, N.S. 8 (1971), 251-266; eadem, *La chiesa di S. Hripsimē*, tr. N. Cruciani (Milan 1972). The Italian edition omits some of the figures of the original Russian edition of Erevan, 1955.

2. J. Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* (Vienna 1918), I, 92-94; see T. T'oromanian, *Nyut'er Haykakan Cartarapetut'yan Patmut'yan* (= Studies in the History of Armenian Architecture) (Erevan 1942, 1948), I, 291-294; II, 74-76.

3. Eremian, *La chiesa di S. Hripsimē*, 47.

4. *Ibid.*, 73-75.

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zone, however, argues for the contemporaneity of the central apse with the chambers on either side. The abrupt discontinuance of the windows' hood molding in the niches on either side is not evidence of a revision but a deliberate design feature that appears again in the seventh century churches of T'ališ (Aruč) and Sisian⁵. The only other alteration observable in the apse is the fill in the lateral windows, which should be dated with the seventeenth century repairs. The three windows, then, seem to be part of the original design of 618, not a Chalcedonian renovation later in the century.

Other features of St Hripsimē, however, still in the pre-Chalcedonian period of the building, show striking points of contact with Byzantine architecture — once one grants the basic difference of a revetment in volcanic stone of Armenia.

In the development of Armenian architecture the most significant feature of St Hripsimē is its cupola which places a windowed drum on a circular cornice. (pl. 1094-5). The cornice is not a true circle but is flattened somewhat on four sides. Eremian, again arguing from irregularities in measurement, attributes the cupola to the tenth century⁶. But Mnač'akanyan reported finding masons' marks in the cupola that match those found in the body of the church⁷. Moreover parallels for the decoration of the dome — tongues radiating from the center and the band of concentric circles at the base — can be found in seventh century churches at Talinn and Mastara⁸.

The design of the cupola should be compared to that of Hagia Sophia. As at the cathedral of Constantinople, a set-back above the cornice provides a walk-way around the drum and neatly separates the unit of drum and dome from the vessel of space in the nave of the church. Exteriorly too there are notable similarities in the massing of simple geometric shapes, placing a circle upon a large cubical base (pl. 1094). The cubical base conceals two very different support systems: a squinch system at St Hripsimē and pendentives at Hagia Sophia; still the Armenian architect seems conscious of the direction that Byzantine architecture had taken.

More striking, because more unusual, is the placement of turrets on the corners of the cubical base at St Hripsimē. This is an *unicum* in Armenian architecture. Eremian wanted to interpret them as counter-weights to give stability to the drum⁹; however they are hollow and they provide access from the cornice walk-way to crawl space above the squinch vaults. Both in form and function they are parallel to the turrets that surmount the western half-dome of Hagia Sophia, which are also part of the access

system for maintenance of the roofs¹⁰. This, of course, is a standard feature of the great vaulted structures of Roman architecture; the massive walls of Roman baths commonly conceal narrow access stairs to the roofs, which finished in turrets above, such as those still visible above the facade of the mausoleum of Sta Costanza, Rome. It is not clear that a building of the modest scale of St Hripsimē needed so elaborate an access system, but it does offer an interesting link to Roman and Constantinopolitan building practice.

The liturgical planning of St Hripsimē also connects the church to Byzantine usages, though sometimes the connections are clearer to the Holy Land than to the capital. The elevation of the sanctuary of St Hripsimē 1.2 m above the level of the nave is a standard feature of Armenian liturgical planning, which is not paralleled in Byzantine architecture. The crypt beneath the sanctuary, however, has many parallels in Palestine. Eremian takes the crypt of St Hripsimē as part of an earlier, fifth century martyrium of the saint; but the crypt appears integral to the seventh century church (pl. 1106-8)¹¹. In Palestine, besides the famous churches of the Nativity at Bethlehem or the Eleona on the Mount of Olives, the recently discovered fifth century churches at Rehovot and at Horvat Berachot provide examples of barrel-vaulted crypts under the sanctuary¹².

5. Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *Armenian Art*, tr. S. Bourne and A. O'Shea (London 1978), pl. 13 and 52; J.-M. Thierry and P. Donabédian, *Les Arts Arméniens* (Paris 1987), pl. 839.

6. *Ibid.*, 52-64.

7. See Mnač'akanyan's discussion of St Hripsimē in B.N. Arak'elyan, *Aknark Hay Cartarapetut'yan Patmut'yan* (= Survey of Armenian Architectural History) (Erevan 1964), 147-150. I am grateful to Nina G. Garsoian for reading this passage for me.

8. G. de Francovich et al., *Architettura medievale armena* (Rome 1968), pls 33, 35 and 53.

9. Eremian, *La chiesa di S. Hripsimē*, 61.

10. The access system at St Hripsimē, as described by Eremian, further provides trap doors leading from the cornice walk-way to space above the barrel vaults of the four arms; and the space over the west arm is linked to crawl space over the northwest corner chamber, which can be reached through a trap door in the groin vault of that chamber. *Ibid.*, figs 24-25.

11. Eremian, *op. cit.*, 75-79.

12. Yoram Tsafirir et al., *Excavations at Rehovot in the Negev*, I, The Northern Church, Qedem, 25 (Jerusalem 1988); Yoram Tsafirir and Yizhar Hirschfeld, The Church and Mosaics at Horvat Berachot, Israel, *DOP* 33 (1979), 291-328.

The design of St Hripsimē incorporates four nearly identical chambers in the corners of the cross plan. Each measures about four meters square and each is provided with an absidiole against the east wall. The two western chambers had entrances from the outside which were later walled up; the north-eastern chamber gives access to the crypt. Eremian, following a lead by T'oromanian, proposed that the western chambers were a narthex area for catechumens while the eastern chambers were for the use of the clergy¹³. The northeast chamber, she proposes, was the residence of the titular priest and the place for consignment of offerings; the southeast was the residence of the priest's assistants. After 630, when the catholicos Ezr built a *zamatun* at the nearby church of St Gayane, the two eastern chambers lost their residential function and became simply sacristies.

The conciliar canons that Eremian cites, however, do not support her argument. Eremian cites canon 15 of the Council of Dvin of 555 (better 551), and canon 19 of Dvin of 719, neither of which mentions the residence of the clergy¹⁴. On the other hand the first canon of the Council of Dvin of 551 implies a clear separation between the residence of the clergy and the church building, in that it prohibits the setting up of altars and the celebration of the liturgy in the homes of the clergy¹⁵. This prohibition, moreover, attests to the tendency of the clergy to celebrate the liturgy in private, a development noted both in episcopal and monastic settings in Alexandria, in the *Life of John the Almsgiver* (d. 641), and in Constantinople, in the Council of Troullo (692)¹⁶. The Council of Dvin, like the Council of Troullo,

did not legislate against the private celebration of liturgy itself (whether for weekday liturgies of for personal reasons), but sought to bring the practice back into the church building where it could be housed with suitable dignity and controlled by the bishop. It is to this development that the corner chambers at St Hripsimē should be attributed, and the provision of absidioles for altars in each of the chambers would seem to bear this out. None of the alleged functions of narthex, residence, or sacristy explains the existence of these absidioles.

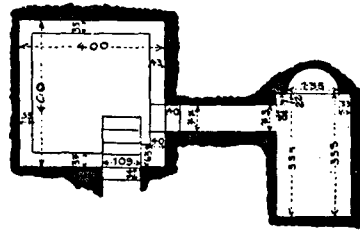
That Armenian architects were conversant with design solutions current in the Byzantine Empire seems undeniable. Whether in the technology of concrete vaulted buildings or in the massing of simple geometric figures or in the accomodation of functions of crypt and side chapels, they were dealing with issues under study in the larger Christian world to the West and South. It is in this larger context the originality of the Armenian contribution is best appreciated.

13. Eremian, *La chiesa di S. H'ripsimē*, 67-73.

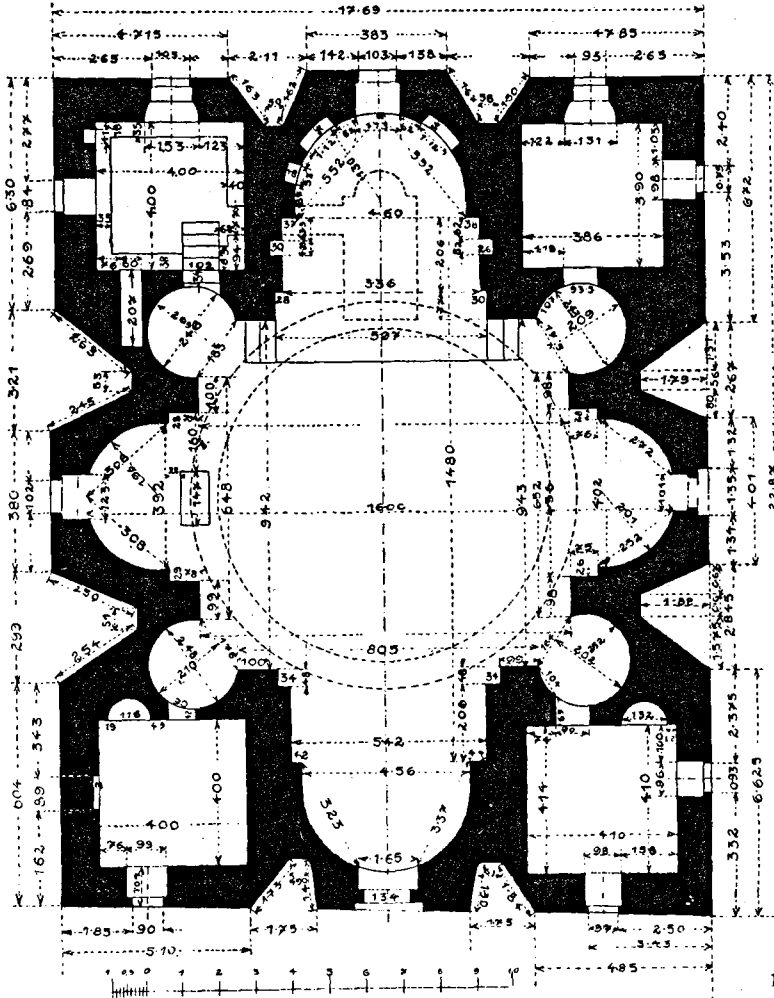
14. *Kanonagirk Hayoc'*, ed. V. Hakobean (Erevan 1964), I, 485, 523-524.

15. *Ibid.*, 478.

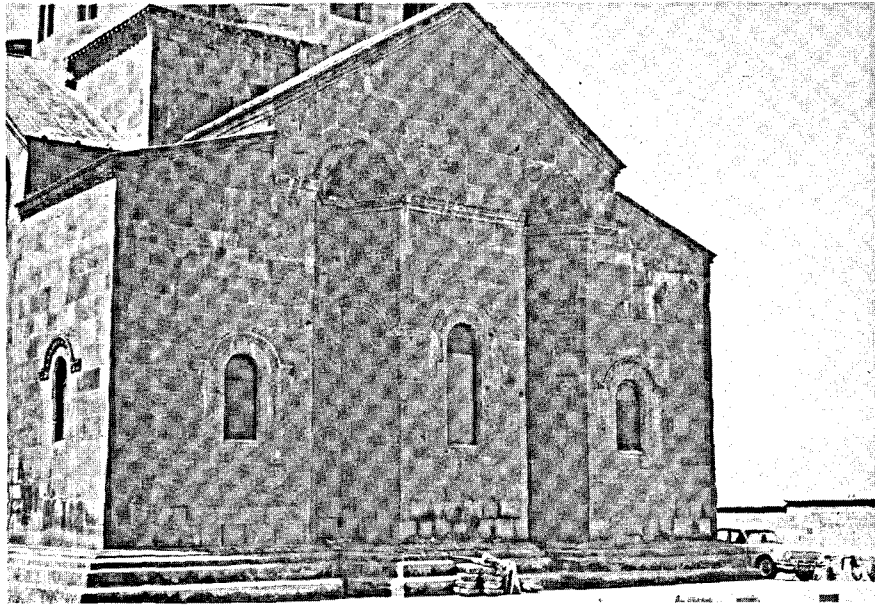
16. Leontius of Neapolis, *Life of John the Almsgiver*, 39 and 42, tr. E. Dawes and N.H. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints* (Oxford 1977), 247, 250 and 251; Council of Trullo, canon 31, Mansi, XI, 956; Thomas F. Mathews, 'Private' Liturgy in Byzantine Architecture: Toward a Reassessment, *CahArch* 30 (1982), 125-138.



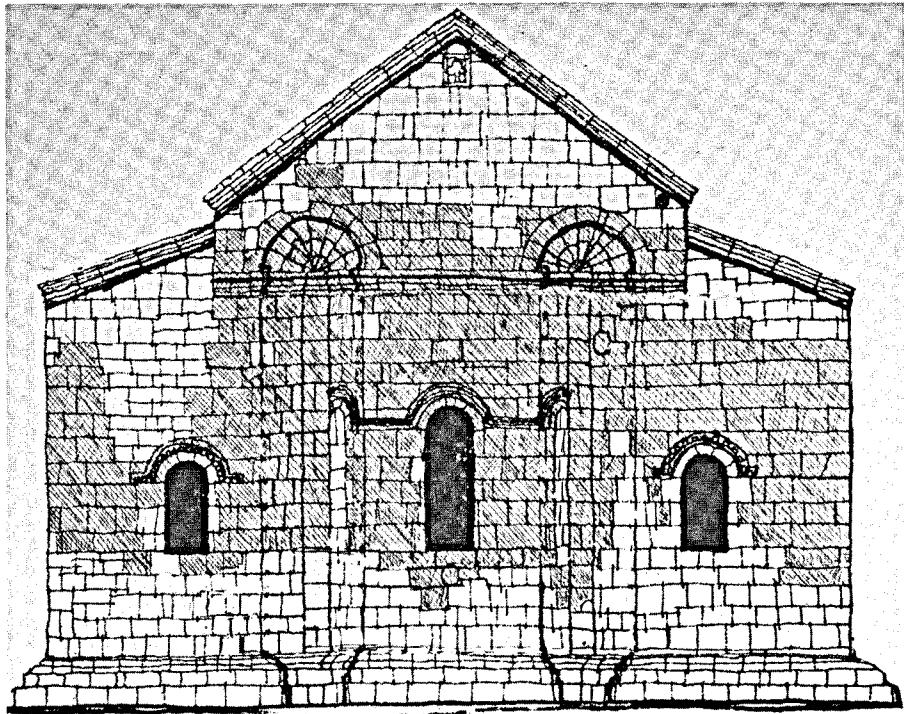
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1. Plan of St Hripsimë by T. Toromanian (Strzygowski, 1918).



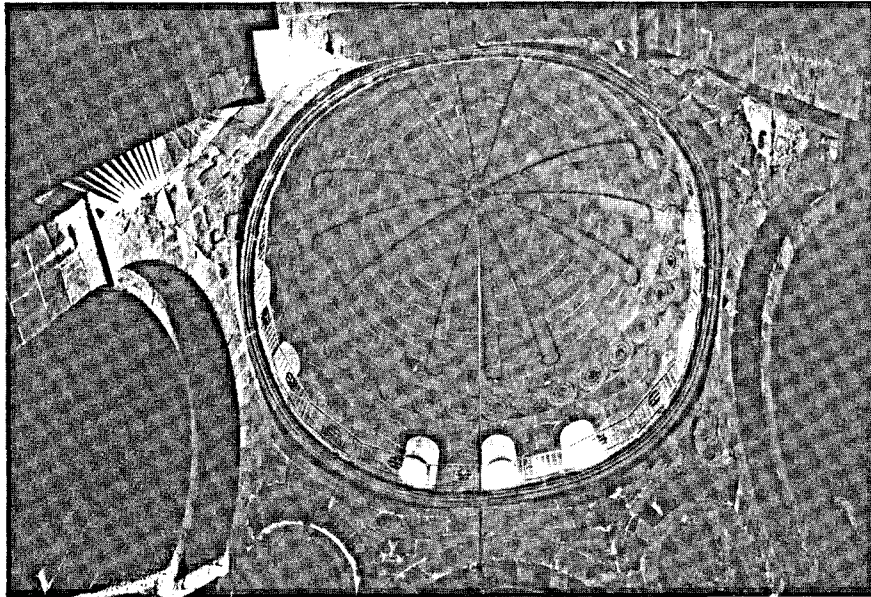
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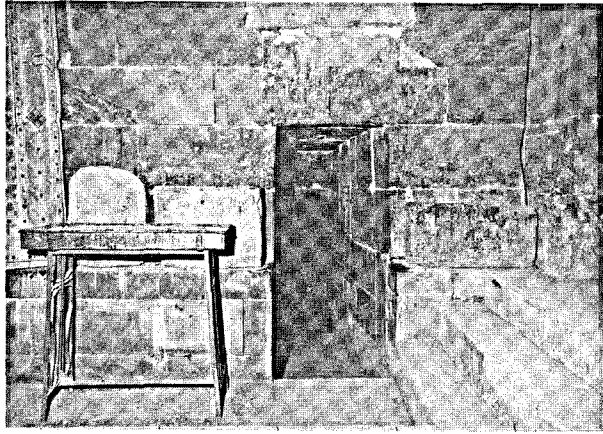
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2. St Hripsimē, east side (photo A. Taylor).

3. Elevation of St Hripsimē, east side (Eremian, fig. 23) with hatching added to indicate original masonry.



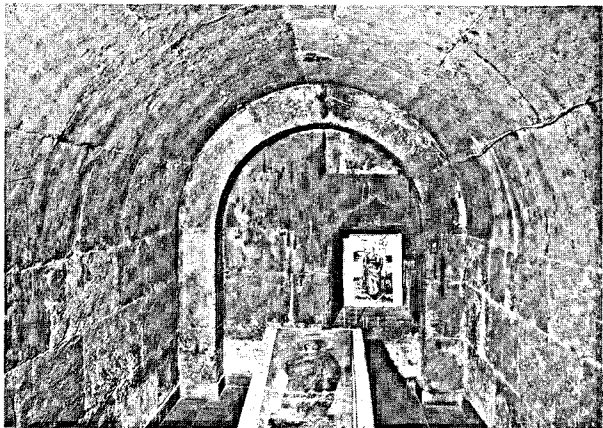
4. St Hripsimē dome from southeast (photo T. Mathews).
5. St Hripsimē, dome interior, with south below (photo T. Mathews).



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6. *St Hripsimè, crypt entrance (photo M. Falla-Castelfranchi).*
7. *St Hripsimè, crypt looking east (photo M. Falla-Castelfranchi).*
8. *St Hripsimè, crypt looking west (photo M. Falla-Castelfranchi).*