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The spring and the khachkar (monuments of the Second World War and formation of new khachkars in Soviet and post Soviet context)

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Abstract The 1950s-1960s in Soviet Armenia were a period of significant cultural development, characterized by a degree of liberalization and a resurgence of national identity within the constraints of Soviet ideology. The exploration of khachkars, medieval Christian-folk monuments, as symbols of Armenian public space during this period offers valuable insights into the intersection of traditional heritage and socialist ideology. The influence of Soviet monuments, particularly those commemorating the Patriotic War, on the design of khachkars is a significant aspect of this cultural phenomenon. By examining fountain-monuments related to the war, this research uncovers the intricate connections between these modern constructs and traditional Armenian architectural forms. The process of constructing war-related monuments in Soviet Armenia was multifaceted, often drawing from traditional types while also incorporating elements of Soviet symbolism and ideology. This decentralized approach to monument construction reflects the complex interplay between historical tradition and contemporary political context. One particularly intriguing aspect of this study is the exploration of how the architectural logic of medieval structures, such as springs, served as the foundation for the dimensional and sculptural solutions of modern khachkars. By tracing this evolution, this article gives a deeper understanding of how traditional forms were adapted and reinterpreted within the framework of Soviet cultural policy. Overall, this research promises to shed light on a previously unstudied aspect of Soviet-Armenian cultural history, offering valuable insights into the evolution of symbolic monuments in the region. By examining the intersections between traditional heritage and socialist ideology, the research spreads a richer understanding of the complexities of cultural expression in the Soviet era.

Keywords: khachkar, spring, monument, cultural policy, Soviet Armenia

1. Introduction

This article discusses the development of khachkars in the 1960s, highlighting two main architectural directions: the adaptation and transformation of small medieval architectural forms and the invention of entirely new ones. It emphasizes the incorporation of traditional sculptural ornaments in both instances. The construction of monuments dedicated to the Soviet-era Patriotic War is particularly noteworthy, as it significantly influenced the spatial, dimensional, and architectural aspects of the emergence of Khachkar.

The primary objective of the article is to discuss the key features of khachkars, with a specific focus on the influence of monuments commemorating the Patriotic War. This influence is reflected in the spatial organization, dimensions, and architectural elements of khachkars. This article suggests that the process of constructing these monuments provided Armenian architects with a platform to integrate site organization, architectural scale solutions, and traditional sculptural elements, thereby contributing to the evolution of Khachkar culture.

In essence, the construction of monuments dedicated to the Patriotic War played a pivotal role in shaping the characteristics of khachkars, influencing their architectural design and contributing to the development of a distinctive khachkar culture.

This research places significant emphasis on spring monuments, especially those dedicated to the Patriotic War, as a crucial influence on the evolution of new monument construction. We hypothesize that these war-related spring monuments served as primary prototypes for the development of khachkars.

Monuments dedicated to Patriotic War victims gained momentum during and after the war, prompting the exploration of suitable architectural and sculptural forms. The construction process was decentralized and not solely driven by state initiatives (Arutyunyan & Oganesyan, 1952; Gabowitsch, 2019; Shagoyan, 2022). Some designs, such as pyramid-

shaped monuments with stars at their tops, were imitated. However, in the Armenian context, medieval small-scale structures, particularly spring monuments, emerged as the main source of inspiration for the overall design of these war memorials.

The influence stems from dimensional and recognizable sculptural similarities between medieval springs and khachkars, especially those enclosed within walls. Thus, this research focuses on uncovering the origins of this influence and understanding how the architectural principles of medieval structures transformed into foundational designs for contemporary khachkars.

During the 1960s, the Khrushchev Thaw in the Soviet Union catalyzed a significant shift in cultural expression, which was particularly notable in Soviet Armenia. As Kozlov and Gilburd (2013) point out, this period witnessed a relaxation of censorship and a fostering of diverse cultural endeavors. In Armenia, this translated into the actualization of national issues, the relative liberalization of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and celebrations of prominent cultural figures, as highlighted by Muradyan (2018). These themes were expressed in various forms, including literature, academic research, and architecture.

The monument landscape of Soviet Armenia, previously dominated by religious symbols, underwent a notable transformation during this period. Antonyan and Muradyan (2023) shed light on the shift in cultural policy, with a partial return of religious motifs and symbols in monument construction. This marked a departure from earlier Soviet attitudes toward religion and cultural heritage. The evolution of monument construction reflected broader ideological shifts, with the cultural landscape becoming "socialist in form and national in content" (Yurchak, 2005), a departure from the earlier mantra of "national in form and socialist in content."

Overall, the Khrushchev Thaw provided a politically relatively free environment for the actualization of Armenian national ideology and cultural heritage, as noted by Shagoyan (2022). Through interconnected ideological mechanisms, Armenia experienced a resurgence of national expression, evident in literature, architecture, and monument construction, marking a significant chapter in Soviet cultural history. Information about the Khrushchev period of cultural changes will be provided in an upcoming subtitle.

2. The Khrushchev “Thaw” and the nationalization of Soviet culture

Khrushchev Thaw refers to a period of relative political and cultural liberalization that took place in the Soviet Union during the 1960s. This era marked a departure from the repressive policies of Stalin's regime and saw some loosening of control over various aspects of Soviet society; in particular, we can outline the sphere of culture and its different branches. The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 was a pivotal event where Nikita Khrushchev delivered a notable report critiquing the cult of personality around Joseph Stalin. This marked the beginning of reforms aimed at easing the strict policies of Stalin, known as the "Thaw," inspired by Ilya Ehrenburg's novel and symbolizing relaxation in various facets of Soviet life. Despite the thaw, the reforms did not usher in true democracy. The Soviet Union maintained its one-party state structure, and the dictatorial regime persisted. The text suggests that while some oppressive Stalinist methods were criticized, the authorities continued to exert control and pressure to manage dissent, utilizing tactics reminiscent of the Stalin era (CPSU Central Committee plenu, 1953).

One significant aspect of the Khrushchev Thaw was the attempt to decentralize and liberalize cultural expression. Khrushchev sought to distance himself from the excesses of Stalinism, which stifled artistic freedom and suppressed dissenting voices. The nationalization of Soviet culture during this period aimed at fostering a more diverse and open cultural environment.

Among the key features of the nationalization of Soviet culture during the Khrushchev Thaw, we can emphasize the "Cultural Thaw". The cultural thaw saw a relaxation of censorship, allowing for a more varied and experimental cultural scene (Kozlov & Gilburd, 2013). In particular, it refers to the field of architecture and its new content. In this context, the khachkar who made in Soviet Armenia gained importance.

In the 1960s, several national themes gained particular relevance in Armenia, and various mechanisms were employed to address and circulate these issues. The following is an overview of each theme that can be outlined as a result of Krushchev “Thaw” (Muradyan, 2018):

- Actualization of the Genocide Issue (Balyan, 2015; Dallakhyan, 1998).
- Relative Liberalization of the Activities of the Armenian Apostolic Church: Several churches are being reopened and recovered (Khochinyan, 2003).
- Celebration of Anniversaries of Outstanding Representatives of National Culture: State-level celebrations, commemorations, and cultural events were organized to mark anniversaries of prominent figures like Komitas, Aram Khacahtryan, Yeghishe Charents, Aksel Bakunts, etc. (Khochinyan, 2003). It is interesting to note that many of the Armenian intellectuals such as Charents, Bakunts, Mahari, etc., who were repressed during the Stalin period, began to be "purified" during the Khrushchev “Thaw”.
- Reflection of National Themes in Armenian Studies, Literature, and Architecture: National themes were reflected in academic research, literature, and architecture. Scholars like A. Abrahamyan and S. Barkhudaryan contributed to Armenian studies, while writers and architects (S. Muradyan, H. Zardaryan, R. Israelyan, T. Marutyan, H. Matevosyan, M.

Galshoyan) explored national themes in their works. This dissemination occurred through publications, exhibitions, and academic forums (Balayan, 2015). In this sense it is important to discuss the “national architectures” and their “work” which began to reflect national ideology and “new soviet nationalism”.

The monument landscape of the previous, pre-Soviet period in Armenia was closely related to the visual manifestations of religiosity (monasteries, churches, chapels, khachkars, and other religious monuments). However, during the period of Soviet religious intolerance or "militant atheism", a transformation of the cultural landscape took place, which implied the physical destruction or neglect of religious symbols: churches, chapels, khachkars and their replacement with new landscape symbols (Antonyan & Muradyan, 2023; Antonyan, 2018). After the establishment of the Soviet regime in Armenia, the Communist Party and the government took serious steps to build new monuments in Soviet Armenia, which were carried out both within the framework of ideological propaganda and within the construction of a new "national and socialist" cultural landscape (Abrahamyan, 2023; Shagoyan, 2022). It should be noted that from the end of the 17th century, after the decline of the Khachkar culture, in the 18th-19th centuries in Armenia, the stone culture clearly declined (Petrosyan, 2008). At the same time, the tsarist government not only did not encourage but also inhibited the construction of monuments in honor of outstanding cultural figures of small nations, including the Armenian people (Sargsyan, 1967). After the October Revolution, the new monument policy attempted to reshape the cultural landscape with symbols related to the revolution and its leaders and fighters: statues, sculptures, and structures with cultural, political and ideological significance. The Patriotic War brought its corrections, and during the war years, the policy seemed to have changed. The policy against religion and religious institutions was softened by Soviet authorities, and religious and cultural heritage was instrumentalized in the process of building new national cultures (Antonyan & Muradyan, 2023). Thus, it can be said that a possibility was gradually created for the construction of monuments containing "religious" motifs and symbols. In addition, until the 1950s and 1960s, the main formula of Soviet culture was "national in form and socialist in content"; then, in the 1960s, under the conditions of the relative weakening of Soviet ideology and control, this formula began to work in the opposite way: cultural heritage and, although partial, but de facto return of religion to the political and cultural field, culture became "socialist in form and national in content" (Yurchak, 2005; Muradyan, 2018; Shagoyan, 2022). All this was also found in the field of monument construction.

Thus, during the "thaw" years, Soviet-Armenian cultural policy took place in a politically relatively free environment, which contributed to the actualization of national ideology, history and cultural heritage and the inclusion of its individual complexes in real cultural processes. All this proceeded through certain interconnected ideological "arrangements" and administrative mechanisms.

3. Medieval Spring Monuments: historical overview

Exploring the role of springs as essential structures in medieval Armenia due to its arid climate and limited water resources reveals a captivating narrative (Arutyunyan & Oganesyan, 1952; Khalpakhchyan, 1971; Shagoyan, 2022). Early examples, dating back to the 5th to 7th centuries in Dvin, showcased a simple yet effective design with water flowing through a vertical slab and a horizontal faucet, serving as a crucial water source (Ghafadaryan, 1952).

As time progressed, the springs in Armenia underwent a notable transformation in the 12th to 13th centuries. The architectural evolution witnessed the emergence of more intricate designs, including single-arched, double-arched, and occasionally three-arched structures featuring semiopen halls. Within these halls, elements such as the water catchment basin, source, and nave were incorporated, demonstrating a fusion of functionality and aesthetic appeal.

Prominent instances of these refined spring structures in locations such as Haghpat, Tatev, Sanahin, Makaravank, and Khorakert underscore the cultural and historical significance of these sites as communal spaces and vital water sources.

The enduring legacy of this architectural style until the 18th and 19th centuries, albeit in smaller forms, reflects the sustained practical and cultural importance of these structures. Examples such as the springs of Surb Gayane, Sanahin, Failabazar in Yerevan, and Tyak illustrate how these designs adapted over time to meet changing needs, offering a glimpse into the technological and cultural advancements of medieval Armenian society where functionality and artistic expression intersected in architecture.

However, there were also "rural" springs, which are typically open-air structures that lack roofs. These simpler designs generally consisted of a water collection basin, a source, and a nave. Notably, some of these rural springs featured vaulted sections in the vicinity of the water source. Additionally, they were occasionally embellished with architectural and sculptural elements and frequently bore commemorative inscriptions (Sargsyan, 1986).

It is intriguing to observe that despite the availability of modern designs for rural open-air springs, the primary source of inspiration for new monuments has been the arched springs from the classical middle Ages. One possibility is that local village craftsmen were not well acquainted with these older structures. Consequently, we see a practical adoption of medieval spring designs by Armenian artists, encompassing architects and sculptors alike. This underscores the dynamic nature of cultural and architectural evolution, where historical influences are reinterpreted and integrated into contemporary expressions, resulting in a unique and culturally rich tapestry (Petrosyan, 2008).

4. Interconnection of Khachkars and Springs

The traditional medieval khachkar is a complex entity that encapsulates diverse facets of medieval life. Its interaction with springs, which is evident in both architecture and inscriptions, reveals its multifunctional nature. The link between khachkars and springs can be examined from various perspectives. One notable angle involves khachkars serving as tangible "documents" affirming the construction of springs, exemplified by the inscription on a khachkar in Khachidzor (Vayots Dzor) dating back to 1288 (Karapetyan, 2022). Khachkars also played a role in water-related disputes, documenting decisions on water usage arrangements, the allocation of specific days for water access, and other occasions necessitating resolution (Harutyunyan, 2010). These inscriptions provide historical insights into the social, legal, and communal aspects of medieval life, making khachkars more than mere artistic or religious artifacts. They become valuable records, illuminating the intricate relationships between communities and their environment, particularly in managing and resolving disputes over essential resources such as water.

Of particular interest is the inscription that commemorates the construction of the Jrvej spring: "This is the house of mourning, Khachatur, who met his demise by the waters of the Jrvej, leaving his parents in perpetual grief. Let us pay homage to this sacred symbol and keep his memory in our prayers to the Lord, in (1173) year, Vard". A poignant folk legend surrounds this tragic event, as recounted by S. Barkhudaryan: it tells the story of a young man who sacrifices his life to ensure that the village has access to water (Barkhudaryan, 1963).

The second interesting aspect is the incorporation of a khachkar as a fundamental element during the construction of the spring. An illustrative example is the renowned Anahit spring in the village of Hatsi, which dates back to the 13th century. In this case, a khachkar was seamlessly integrated into the spring's architectural design, and subsequently, additional khachkars were also brought and positioned alongside the spring. A similar embedded khachkar was present in the spring of 1831 in Sanahin.

Of greater significance for our topic is the fact that the initial spring monuments, dedicated to the memories of Patriotic War victims, closely replicate the dimensional and architectural features of walled khachkars (Figure 1). Notably, the interconnection between Soviet Armenian springs and modern khachkars was noted by H. Marutyan (Marutyan, 2009). Similar to walled khachkars, these springs exhibit gabled roofs, often featuring meticulously crafted dentils and cornices, a design element commonly found in the sculptural decorations of various medieval church porches. In numerous instances, decorative columns and capitals are incorporated into the design, creating a setting that typically takes the form of a rosette, resembling the intricate design seen on a khachkar. It is this very architectural form that skilled craftsmen integrate into the construction of the spring.

Figure 1 Walled Khachkar, Yeghegis 1340.

Hence, it can be affirmed that the spring monuments dedicated to the Patriotic War closely mirror the architectural composition of springs from the classical Middle Ages and, to some extent, from the 18th and 19th centuries. This architectural resemblance includes features such as a gable roof, an arch-tabernacle, a central rosette from which water flows, and, in certain instances, a water catchment basin.

We verified the inaugural spring monument of this type in 1943 in Parakar (Figure 2) by Rafael Israelyan (Arutyunyan & Oganesyan, 1952).

Figure 2 The first spring monument, Parakar, 1943.

In a broader context, when discussing spring monuments from the Soviet era, it is important to acknowledge that their construction commenced in the latter stages of the Patriotic War, and it was architect Rafael Israelian himself who played a pivotal role in their inception.

Between 1942 and 1960, the architect created approximately two dozen similar works. The majority of these monuments, constructed during that period, were dedicated to commemorating the victims of the Patriotic War. In the embellishment of these springs, architect-sculptors endeavored to incorporate elements reminiscent of khachkar compositions, including arch-tabernacles, sculpted borders, rosettes, plant-geometric motifs, etc. (Figure 3). It appears that the only element absent in these spring monuments was the traditional cross, which was symbolically "replaced" by the rosette-adorned faucet. The architect not only adhered to the classical spring style but also sought to incorporate medieval khachkar elements into his work. An example of this can be seen in his "Katnaghbyur" monument, located in the courtyard of the Mayravank in Etchmiadzin.

Figure 3 Spring monument, Yeghvard, 1985.

The connection between springs and khachkars persisted even during years of independence. However, during this period, they appeared to predominantly replicate the silhouette of a vertical monument, specifically a khachkar. Often, they were even referred to as "khachkar-aghbyur" or "khachaghbyur" in inscriptions. These monuments resembled khachkars but with the addition of a faucet protruding from the socket and a water collection basin in front. Regrettably, many of these "memorial springs" eventually dry over time.

5. Final considerations

In conclusion, an examination of Armenian spring monuments reveals that in the process of "recycling" (Luehrman, 2005; Cormina & Shtirkov, 2015), the heritage of the past in Armenia did not commence after the collapse of the Soviet regime but rather during the Soviet era. This cultural revitalization gained significant momentum, particularly during the "National Awakening" and the Khrushchev Thaw periods. These Soviet-era monuments played a pivotal role in laying the foundation for the emergence of the first khachkars, which began to appear as early as the 1960s.

It is evident that the design of Patriotic War monuments in Armenia was significantly influenced by the architectural style of medieval hall-like springs. Rafael Israeli was among the early architects who embraced this particular style. When examining the architectural structure of postwar monuments in Armenia dedicated to the Patriotic War, it becomes apparent that they drew inspiration from the architectural form of medieval roofed springs.

During the 1960s, there was a pivotal shift in the discourse surrounding the Armenian Genocide, as it evolved into a focal point of national significance. This transformation sparked extensive discussions involving both the general public and governmental bodies. As part of the commemorative efforts for Genocide's 50th anniversary, a particularly noteworthy development unfolded in 1965—the construction of one of the earliest memorials dedicated to the Genocide victims in Soviet Armenia (Figure 4). Adding to its significance, the project was entrusted to the renowned architect Rafael Israeli for its design, marking a poignant chapter in the ongoing modernization of how the Armenian Genocide was perceived and remembered.

Figure 4 Khachkar, Etchmiadzin, 1965.

The memorial was submitted to the Genocide Monument Project Competition in 1963. Although it did not win the competition, it was later raised in Etchmiadzin through the initiative of the Mother See. It can be considered the first authenticated monument created in the form of a khachkar. Therefore, we can affirm that in the construction of monuments dedicated to the Patriotic War and the Armenian Genocide, the architect was already experimenting with the incorporation of khachkar elements, particularly in terms of dimensional and partially sculptural details. The monument required just one key element to transform into a khachkar: the cross. It was not until the 1960s, with a shift in ideological perspectives and the initial forays into khachkar creation, that the cross was added and found its rightful place. This marked the inception of a new, modern chapter in the art of khachkar making.

In the post-Soviet era, khachkars have become one of the most prevalent elements in the landscape of both the Armenian public and private spaces. It is important to highlight that in addition to traditional forms, modern Khachkar culture has embraced the ideology and symbolism of the Artsakh liberation movement, where the aspect of religion, particularly Christian identity, played a significant role. Therefore, the substantial growth of Khachkar culture during the years of Armenian independence is unquestionably a consequence not only of religious revival but also of the processes related to the monumental representation of the Artsakh liberation struggle. These processes played a pivotal role in determining the location and organization of khachkars and shaping their distinctive compositional features.

Therefore, to conclude the research, it can be emphasized that the new wave of the Khachkar-making process that started in the Soviet "Thaw" period underwent several stages of development and was the result of certain sociocultural processes, such as the following:

- **Religious and National Identity:** The intertwining of religious and national identity is evident in the modern khachkar culture. The Christian identity, closely tied to Armenian heritage, is emphasized, making khachkars not only artistic expressions but also symbols of faith and national pride.
- **Artsakh Liberation Movement:** The Artsakh liberation movement, which sought the independence of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), has left a profound impact on Armenian identity and culture. Khachkars have become a symbolic representation of the struggle for Artsakh liberation.
- **Monumental Representation of Struggle:** Khachkars are utilized as monuments to represent the Artsakh liberation struggle. They serve as tangible symbols of resilience, remembrance, and the sacrifices made during the conflict.
- **Distinctive Compositional Features:** The compositional features of modern khachkars are shaped by the specific symbolism associated with the war, victory, genocide, earthquake, etc. Elements such as crosses, motifs, and inscriptions may be designed to convey messages related to the struggle and the endurance of the Armenian people.

In summary, the growth of Khachkar culture during the 1960s, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was multifaceted, encompassing religious revival, cultural identity, and the monumental representation of historical struggles. The evolution of khachkars reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary challenges, making them powerful symbols in the Armenian cultural and historical narrative.

Ethical considerations

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Conflict of interest

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