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# When Was Ani Cathedral Constructed?

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**A**t first glance, the question posed by the title of this article may give rise to disbelief: Isn't the time of construction clear and well accepted in specialist circles and literature? As will be shown in this article a clarification has become an urgent necessity in our times.

Since the end of the last century, art historians have noticed the similarity of Ani Cathedral's architecture to that of Western Europe, specially to that of twelfth and thirteenth century Italian Gothic monuments. Some of these historians have come to the conclusion that the cathedral must be a late replica of an Italian original on Armenian soil. One little detail disturbs the coherence of this theory: A twenty-one-line inscription located near the southwest corner of the cathedral, in the vicinity of the sundial. According to that inscription, the cathedral was completed in the year 1001 A.D.

Some archaeologists of the late nineteenth century—like G. Shnaadze, N. Kontakov, and others—did not agree that the cathedral could have anticipated European originals by one and half to two centuries. Attempting to find a way out of the dilemma, they put forward the opinion that the inscription was not reliable, that it had apparently been transferred to the cathedral from an older monument, or that it was simply a decoration, placed there as part of the composition of the south facade.

Later, a well-versed authority on world art and history, the Austrian Josef Strzygowski, having studied Armenian art and architecture by personal visit to many sites, put forward real evidence which disproved the theories of the above-mentioned archaeologists. In his two-volume 1918 capital publication titled *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* (Armenian architecture and Europe) he demonstrated that the early medieval

routes of architectural influence extended not from west to east, but in the opposite direction, from Armenia to Europe. He argued that the Armenians had preempted Europe by about 150 years.

According to Strzygowski, Ani Cathedral should be considered the eastern source of the Gothic style. From the European point of view, this cathedral was the most valuable achievement ever created by Armenian architecture.

In view of the attempts by some archaeologists of the first half of the twentieth century to revive the fallacious theories of G. Shnaadze and N. Kontakov by giving them a different complexion, we propose to discuss this question here, despite the fact that we consider Strzygowski's criticism of these theories quite adequate and definitive. There are still some researchers who believe that these theories are coherent and, as they have pursued their views in specialist literature, it becomes necessary to respond to them and reject them in a scientific manner.

There are two erroneous theories about when Ani Cathedral was constructed. According to the first theory, "The cathedral's appearance today is the result of reconstruction. It is not a product of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, but rather of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries."<sup>1</sup>

According to the second erroneous theory, the cathedral was completed not in 1000/1001 A.D. but between 1010 and 1012. This difference of ten to twelve years is significant because it raises the question of when the architectural style of Ani was created and who its author was. Is it the work of the great medieval architect Trdat, or simply a twelfth or thirteenth century replica of another architect's work? And then, is the source of Italian Gothic to be found in Ani Cathedral, or in some other church built outside Armenia during those ten to twelve years?

The reconstruction theory, which is to a certain extent inherited from nineteenth century researchers, was put forward by the well-known early twentieth century archaeologist Nikolai Y. Marr. In his work titled *Ani*, he writes that the present appearance of the cathedral is the result of work carried out "no earlier than the thirteenth century."<sup>2</sup>

On what basis does he make this pronouncement? First, "the decorative motifs, as well as the perfection of sculptural detail above the blind arcading," could not be products of the tenth century.<sup>3</sup> The fact is, however, that sculptural details of the intricacy and perfection referred to by Marr are found neither in monuments of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, nor in any later monuments. On the contrary, such work is found in earlier monuments, like the Shirakavan church (ninth to tenth centuries), in the same panels, that is, in the crown of the triangular-base blind arcading. The conclusion can only be that the presence of sculptural intricacy and perfection is evidence of the presence of a creative and talented master sculptor, rather than of late construction.

Comparing the cathedral and Gagikashen church (also a tenth century monument) in terms of equivalent details, Marr writes that "in Gagikashen, the composition is more archaic, the decorative motif has a Greek derivation, the execution is symmetrical, etc."<sup>4</sup>

It is known that the architect of Gagikashen church had received a royal commission to replicate in Ani the seventh century monument of Zvartnots, and consequently, the details and composition could indeed be expected to be archaic. But it must be noted to the credit of the builder that he indeed built a replica of Zvartnots in Ani, but he did so without copying the sculptural details. Instead, he created new details, more contemporary and fresh rather than archaic. The builder of Ani Cathedral, on the other hand, did not have such a commission, and had no reason to abandon the contemporary and replicate archaic motifs on his completely new structure.

In Gagikashen church, the Greek influence may be seen in the volutes of internal column capitals alone, which, however, have been so radically transformed as to have a more local character than a Greek one. The same is true of Zvartnots.

In the case in question, one cannot use the reasoning that for the cathedral to be contemporary with Gagikashen it would have to have similar capitals. The column capitals of the cathedral have no volutes, not because they were later structures, but because every column has its own capital and every capital its own column. The architect of Ani Cathedral had no place for volutes, because in the strict order of symmetry he had created, there was no need for such. One fact remains undeniable however—and Marr ought to have observed it—that the external decorative column capitals of the cathedral and the capitals of the columns defining the extent of external wall surfaces of Gagikashen, are unmistakably contemporary and almost identical.

Finally, every type of structure, in accordance with its forms and requirements, may have a certain type and quantity of sculptural details, and that has nothing to do with whether it is old or new. At the cathedral, all the details are exposed and may thus appear to be excessive to the archaeologist, while in Gagikashen they are mostly covered by debris and cannot be seen in their entirety.

In support of his basic thesis, Marr discusses some other phenomena as well. He writes: "Period is indicated by masonry techniques, which is perfect and high quality; the color of stone, which is reddish; the mortar, which has great strength."<sup>5</sup> According to him, these indicators point not to the tenth but to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

We know, and Marr certainly knew, that high-quality masonry is characteristic not only of thirteenth, but also of seventh century buildings of worship. The mortar used in them is likewise strong. As regards the bright reddish color of stone, one should bear in mind that

in the Shirak area the use of red stone was not the exception either before or after the construction of the cathedral. Local quarries, in addition to the dark-hued stones, bear abundant supplies of red stone of various hues, and the Smbatian walls of Ani, built well before the cathedral, are made of the same type of reddish stone. The contemporary church of Mar-mashen (988-1029) was also built in the same reddish, bright-colored stone as the cathedral. Why should that color have been avoided in a city rising to the height of its glory? So the late tenth century Arakelots and Gagikashen churches were built in dark stones: The leaders of the city had the sensitivity of urban planners in avoiding the monotony of single-colored masonry. Most importantly, the interior of the cathedral walls were built in the same reddish stone.

As further evidence in favor of his argument, Marr mentions the façades of the monument, the character of the decorative columns, which "does not conform to the rule of double columns."<sup>6</sup> To our knowledge, no such rule existed. The architect has opted, in accordance with his taste, to design the blind arcading in single rather than double columns (figs. 1,2).

The leader of excavations at Ani for so many years could not help but observe—although he did not bother to commit it to paper—that the decorations defining the shape of the drum under the dome of the same structure consist of a blind arcade with double columns. Double columns may be seen also on façade decorative features of the tenth century Arakelots church, as well as the blind arcading which articulates the elevations of the thirteenth century Church of Saint Gregory, built by Tigran Honents.

The conclusion can only be that there is no connection between the period of construction and the number of columns.

A large model of an ordinary church, found in the 1911 excavations of an eighth century monument, is considered by Marr to be an important piece of evidence in support of his view. He considers this model to represent the cathedral and tries to persuade his reader that until the tenth century the cathedral was no more than an ordinary church and had no rich decorations. Finally, Marr concludes that the entire cathedral was reconstructed in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and all its façades, including the decorative blind arcading, received a face-lift at that time.<sup>7</sup> But Marr has no proof to offer. There is no structural analysis to show that there was indeed a new layer of stone added to the façade. There are instead a large number of high-quality nineteenth century photographs. These photographs show that the stones have fallen off certain parts of the monument, especially the façade. The specialized and detailed study of these photographs does not support Marr's views. And, ultimately, a face-lift does not change the fundamental structure of the monument.

For Marr, the commemorative inscription mentioned earlier is paleographic proof for his attribution of the monument to the thirteenth century. Shnaadze and Kontakov, in contrast, considered the inscription to be older than the cathedral, transplanted onto it. Examining the artifact, a well-known authority on inscriptions, Suren Avagian, has concluded that it belongs to the early eleventh century.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the lettering of the inscription is identical to that of many other tenth and eleventh century inscriptions.

On the first line of the inscription, the Armenian chronology is followed by the Byzantine chronology, given in Armenian characters. Marr considers the Byzantine inscription to be Georgian, reasoning that a Byzantine chronology would not be possible during the reign of the Bagratuni kings. He does not notice that the same inscription calls Gagik I the king of kings of Armenians and Georgians. In our opinion, even if the chronology is Georgian, that would not be unusual, and would certainly not make the cathedral two hundred years younger.

Adherents to Marr's theory include G. Chubinashvili, who has based some of his own work on it, and A. Jacobson, who has used it and extended it to create his novel but, as it were, unoriginal theories, which are cut off from reality. As already mentioned, Strzygowski views the cathedral as a tenth century structure, and does not accept the view that it has been reconstructed.

The other erroneous theory regarding the date Ani Cathedral was completed emerges out of the recent attempts of certain Armenian scholars to "correct" the date. As a result of these efforts, A. G. Abrahamian, S. A. Avagian, and (earlier) N. Akinian have reached the conclusion that the cathedral was completed between 1010 and 1012.

A critical analysis of the grounds leading the above scholars to such a conclusion, brings us to a different conclusion altogether. Fortunately, the twenty-one-line commemorative inscription on the five rows of tuffa masonry is well preserved and an admirable photograph, the work of K. Basmajian, has been published and republished several times.

The first line of the inscription shows the Armenian and Byzantine dates in Armenian characters and the Arabic date in three ciphers. From the second to the middle of the thirteenth line, the text has been engraved in honor of Queen Katramide, and from there to the end of the eighteenth line, in honor of the Catholicos Sargis. From the nineteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first line, three groups of dates are given in Armenian letters. Finally, the rest of the twenty-first line commemorates the scribe of the text, who is called Bene.

Ghevond Alishan expresses the opinion that the first part of the first line contains the Armenian letters for the year 1001, and that is the date of completion.<sup>9</sup> The last part of that line, bearing the three ciphers awaits interpretation. The date on the bottom is 1012, and that is the date the

complex around the cathedral was completed.

Nerses Akinian interprets the dates on the first line as 999/1000 and the dates on the bottom as 1009/1012. He reads the ciphers at the end of the first line as A.H. 390, which corresponds with A.D. 999/1000. He points out that the first cipher must be read from right to left and is made out of the fusion of the Armenian letters for ninety and three hundred. He explains, "In order that an Islamic inscription on an Armenian church not offend the faithful, the scribe felt obliged to use ciphers."<sup>10</sup>

A. Abrahamian not only rejects Akinian's explanations, but also considers his logic "forced."<sup>11</sup> He accepts Akinian's opinion that the ciphers represent an Arabic date, but sees in the first cipher not the letters for 390, but the letters for 402. He agrees with Akinian that the second cipher contains the letters for "year," while the third cipher, to him, spells the word for "infidels." The inscription therefore refers to A.H. 402, which corresponds with 1011 of the common era.

Confident about his interpretation, Abrahamian declares that "the presence of Arabic dates in the very first line of the inscription . . . fundamentally undermines the opinion which has gained acceptance in Armenian studies that Ani Cathedral was constructed in 1000 or 1001."<sup>12</sup> He convinces himself that all dates given in the inscription can signify but one time and even the Armenian and Byzantine dates should be changed to correspond to the Arabic date. He does not say why the reverse should not be done instead. Thereafter, he treats the text in the fashion he suggests, adding new letters to the inscription and transposing parts of the text to arrive at his predetermined conclusions. Finally, he declares, "In this manner, our interpretation will make it possible to resolve all . . . questions related to Ani Cathedral's time of construction," and he places the date of completion at 1012.<sup>13</sup>

In our opinion, neither Abrahamian's interpretation, nor his conclusions are a satisfactory solution to the problem. The interpretation of the three dates on the first line of the inscription, and especially of the coded date, is, to use his own terminology, "forced."

Abrahamian and Avagian fail to see the letters for 390 reading either from right to left or from left to right. Both accept that the Arabic date was purposely inscribed in a "difficult to interpret, complex conjunction of letters," but they nonetheless try to interpret it in the simplest manner.

We follow Akinian's advice to read the first cipher from right to left, and go beyond it, reading from the bottom to the top. In that way the interwoven letters for 390 are clearly visible. The key to this reading is provided by an angled line with one end pointing right and the other pointing down. This symbol for reading from right to left and from bottom to top, was considered by Avagian and Abrahamian to be undecipherable, since "no Armenian letter takes a diacritic on the left."

This operation turns them into legitimate and legible Armenian letters and allows the interpretation of the ciphers as "the year 390 of the infidels," which corresponds with A.D. 999/1000. It is worth noting that this interpretation of the ciphers corresponds with Akinian's reading of the first cipher, Alishan's reading of the second ("year"), and Abrahamian's reading of the third ("infidels").

What remains to be seen is what was completed in A.D. 999/1000 and what was completed in A.D. 1010/1012.

Ghevond Alishan considers 999/1000 as the year of the cathedral's completion and 1010/1012 as the year the complex around the cathedral was completed and the inscription was engraved. Akinian considers the former date to be the year the cathedral's construction commenced (or perhaps recommenced), and the latter as the year it was completed. Abrahamian does not recognize the former date, and considers the latter to be the year of completion. Avagian shares Akinian's opinion that the construction which was interrupted in 989 was recommenced in 1001 and completed in 1012.

It is known that Smbat II was building the cathedral when he died in 989. The construction was completed through the efforts of Queen Katramide, the consort of Smbat's brother and successor Gagik I.

The statements of our contemporary historians of architecture—N. Tokarskiy, K. Hovhannisian, S. Mnatsakanian—to the effect that Smbat I died immediately after laying the foundation of the cathedral have no basis.<sup>14</sup> Historical narratives convince us, however, that King Smbat not only laid the foundations for the cathedral, but also oversaw some of the actual construction. Kirakos Gandzaketsi writes, "And his wife Queen Katramide finished the holy cathedral, which King Smbat was unable to complete." Elsewhere he writes, "Smbat, who was called shahnshah [king of kings] . . . also founded the bright cathedral in our city and was unable to finish it, because he met his end in death."<sup>15</sup>

The architect of the cathedral, Trdat, had in the meantime started the church at Argina in A.D. 972, the construction of which would in every likelihood have been completed by A.D. 985 (thirteen years); he could participate in the laying of Ani Cathedral's foundation by 985 at the latest. We should also bear in mind that in accordance with information given by narrators, Gagik, Smbat's younger brother, founded Saint Gregory (Gagikashen) in 988, while at about that same time Vahram Pahlavuni founded the famous Marmashen. Obviously, King Smbat would not have founded his cathedral any later than his subordinates founded theirs.

The historians mentioned above assume that the cathedral's construction was interrupted after Smbat's death, while the architect Trdat went to Constantinople to rebuild the dome of Hagia Sofia, returning four years later to continue the construction of the cathedral, and completing it by 1001 A.D. The assumption that the construction of the cathedral was

interrupted has no basis in evidence. There is some evidence that the construction of the cathedral continued during Trdat's four-year absence. The construction of the cathedral, with its large dimensions and complex structure, could not be completed in the seven to eight years from 993 to 1001. The view of Akinian, Abrahamian, and Avagian that the construction stopped in 989 and was finally continued after about twelve years in 1001 is even more unlikely. The newly coronated king of kings Gagik and his queen Katramide would not tolerate the existence of an abandoned construction site right in the middle of their capital for twelve years.

A twelve-year discontinuance of construction would cause the deterioration of foundations and the crumbling of walls to a point that resumption of work would not be possible. Would narrators and the inscription bother to mention the founder's name, if all he did was build the foundations to ground level (or not even that far) next to that of Katramide, who built the entire cathedral from the ground up?

Our study of the available material indicates that Ghevond Alishan was correct in considering the year inscribed on the first line of the inscription (1001 or 1000 A.D.) to be the year construction was completed.

The date 1010 to 1012 given in the lower part of the inscription, could, in our opinion, refer to the death of Katramide and the incision of the inscription in her memory. Perhaps the queen had in her modesty not had her name mentioned on the building. This is suggested by the fact that in the second part of the inscription, Catholicos Sargis recommends a ceremony to commemorate the queen on every Ascension Day. It is also possible that the part of the inscription referring to Queen Katramide was engraved in 1001 A.D., while the part referring to Catholicos Sargis was carried out in 1010/1012 by the hand of the same sculptor, Bené. □

*Translated by Garbis Armen*



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>N. Marr, *Ani* (Leningrad-Moscow, 1934), p. 12; idem, *Ani* (Yerevan, 1939), p. 218.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 222.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 218.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 221.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 218.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 218, 220, 222.
- <sup>8</sup>Suren Avagian, "Anii Mair tachari shinararakan ardzanagrutian daretvere" (The dates on the inscription about Ani Cathedral's construction), *Lraber Hasarakakan Gitutiunneri*, 1979, no. 11, pp. 70-77.
- <sup>9</sup>Ghevond Alishan, *Shirak* (Venice, 1881), p. 70.
- <sup>10</sup>N. Akinian, "Anii Mair yekeghetsvo yev mijnaberdi yekeghetsvo ardzanagrutiunneru masin" (On the inscriptions of Ani Cathedral and the Citadel Church), *Handes Amsorya*, 1932, pp. 539-41.
- <sup>11</sup>A. G. Abrahamian, *Hayots gir yev grchutiun* (Armenian script and calligraphy), (Yerevan, 1973), p. 129. Idem, "Zhamanakagrakan Chshgrtumner" (Chronological corrections), *Handes Amsorya*, 1976, pp. 158-61.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 159.
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup>N. M. Tokarskiy, *Arkhitektura Armenii IV-XIV vv* (Architecture of Armenia, 4th-14th centuries), (Yerevan, 1961), p. 193; K. L. Oganessian, *Zodchiy Trdat* (Architect Trdat), (Yerevan, 1951), p. 19; S. Kh. Mnatsakanyan, "Arkhitektura Armenii v kontekste zodchestva Perednego Vostoka" (The architecture of Armenia in the context of the architecture of the Near East), *Lraber Hasarakakan Gitutiunneri*, 1985, no. 12, pp. 66-74.
- <sup>15</sup>Kirakos Gandzaketsi, *Hayots Patmutiun* (History of the Armenians), (Moscow, 1976), p. 82. ■



FIGURE 1. EASTERN ALTAR OF ANI CATHEDRAL.

Խնծաքան ի սեպուքս ճակատս յայտես զ  
 \* ի ճառս անստիանայի եւ ճգնի հոգեհոգի  
 սի ճանչոս անստիանայի տեւոյն փոխանայ  
 որո հանանայ անստիանայի ստիանայի  
 եւ ստիանայի անստիանայի ճակատս  
 սի ստիանայի անստիանայի ճակատս  
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Ի ճակատս անստիանայի անստիանայի ճակատս  
 սի ստիանայի անստիանայի ճակատս  
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 սի ստիանայի անստիանայի ճակատս

\* ճակատս անստիանայի անստիանայի ճակատս անստիանայի անստիանայի ճակատս

*Հրատ. Նահապետիկանց, ք. 333-334, Ջուղխանց, 5:*  
*Սարգիսեան, 117-118, Ալիշան, 67-70: Գեորգիանց,*  
*34: Բագրատիան, № 82*  
 Լուսակի, 100թ, XIII.

FIGURE 2. INSCRIPTION.

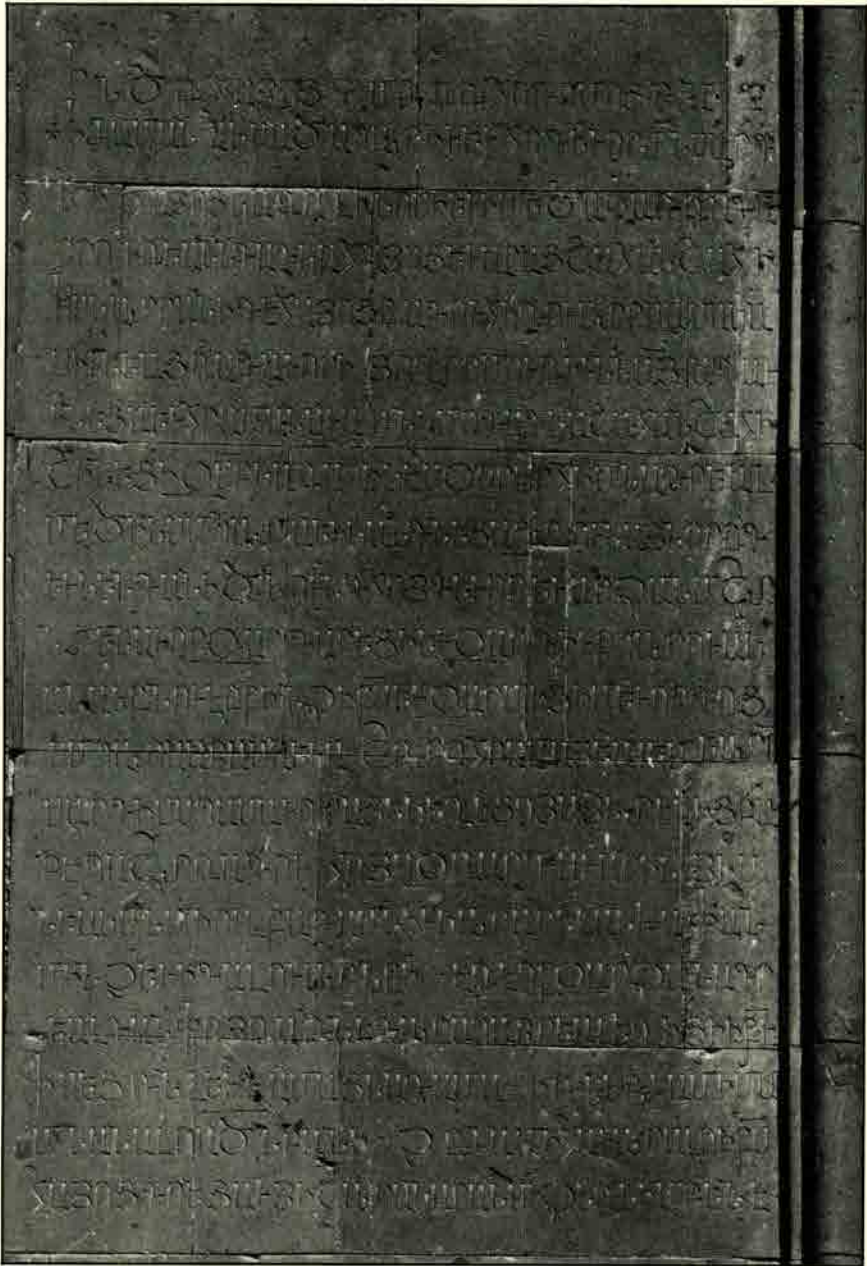


FIGURE 3. INSCRIPTION.

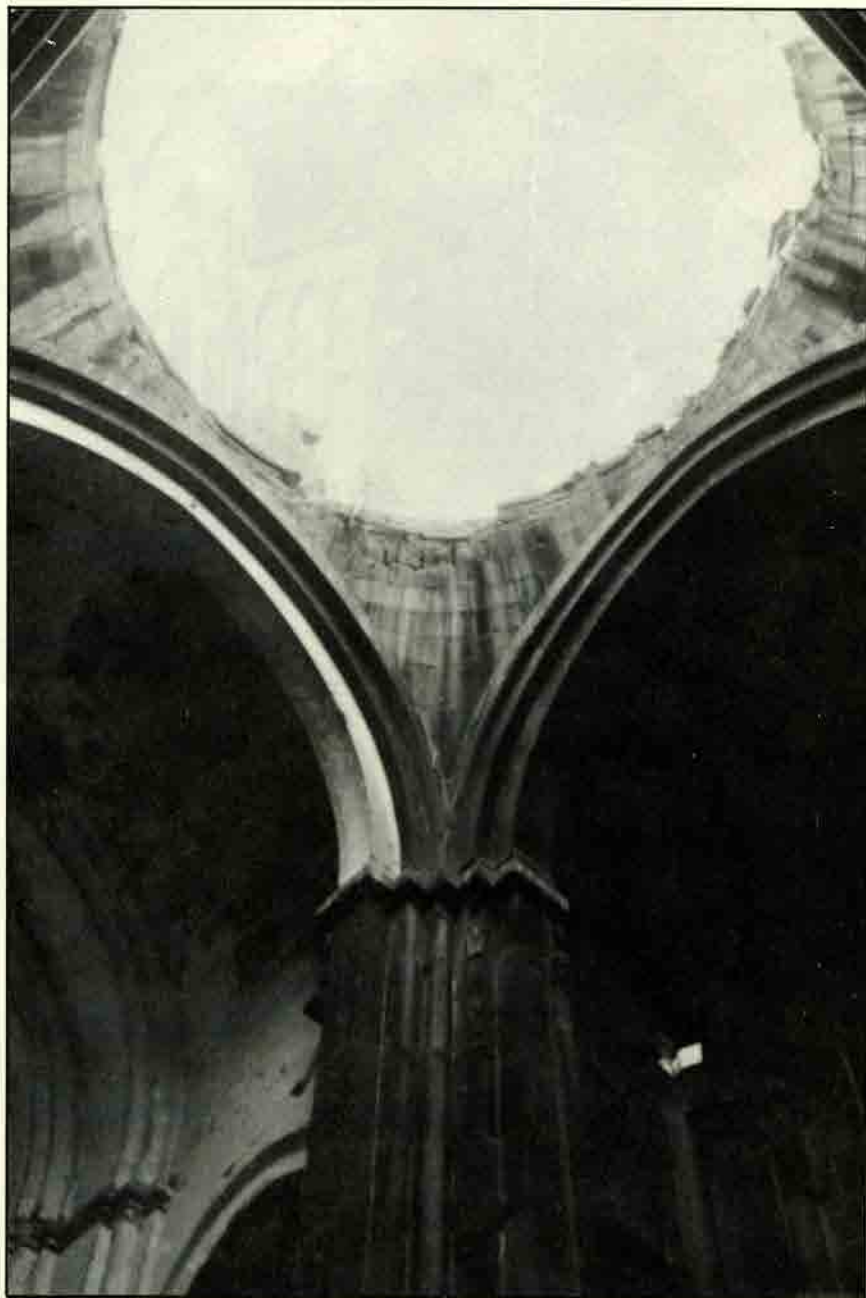


FIGURE 4. DESTROYED CENTRAL DOME OF ANI CATHEDRAL.



FIGURE 5. SOUTHEASTERN ELEVATION OF ANI CATHEDRAL.



FIGURE 6. WESTERN ELEVATION OF ANI CATHEDRAL.

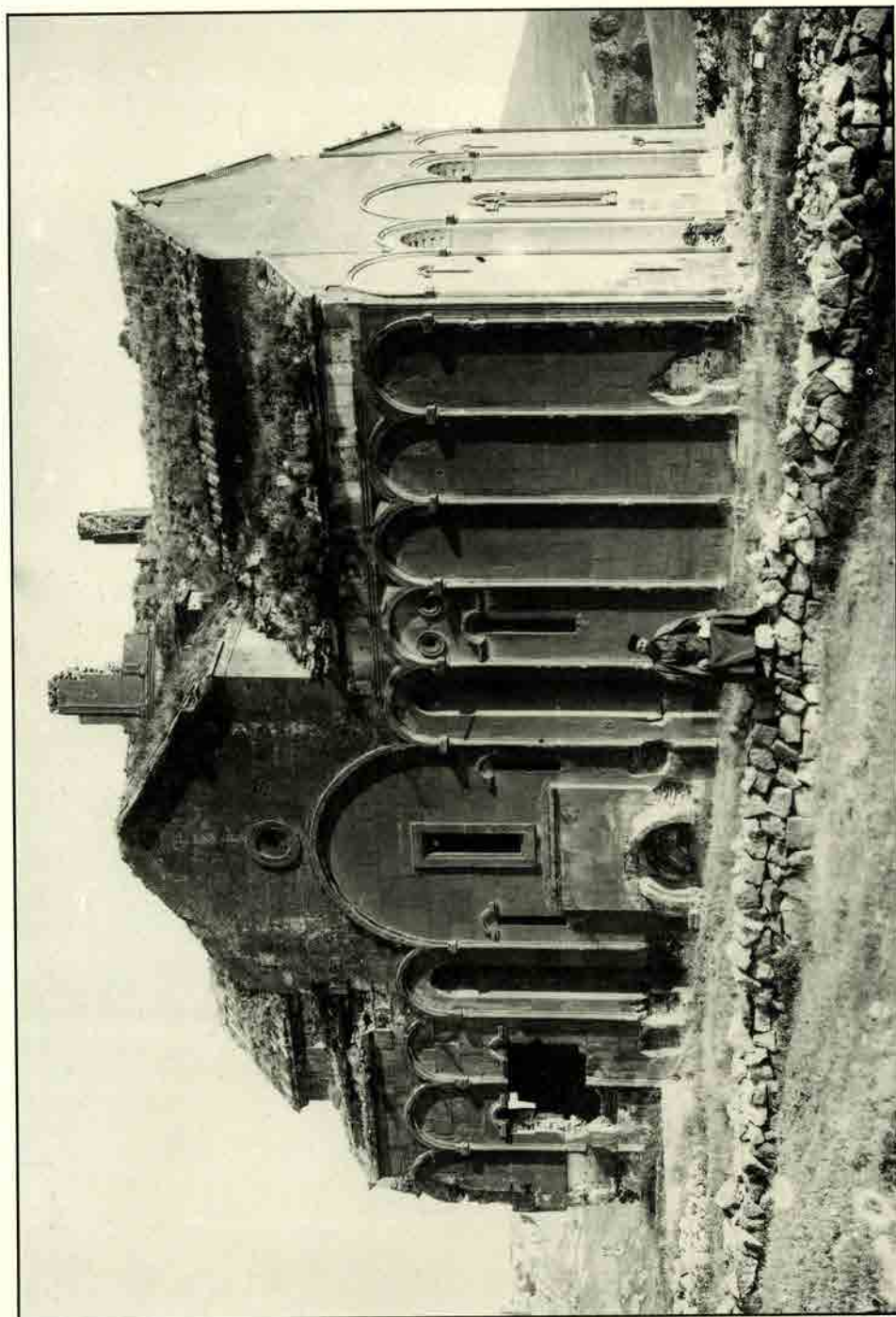


FIGURE 7. NORTHEASTERN ELEVATION OF ANI CATHEDRAL.