

# The Church of the Holy Cross of Ałt‘amar

*Politics, Art, Spirituality in the Kingdom of Vaspurakan*

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## King Gagik Arcruni's Portrait on the Church of Ałt'amar

*Gohar Grigoryan*



FIGURE 15.1  
Church of the Holy Cross, Ałt'amar,  
915–921, north-west view  
PHOTOGRAPH BY HRAIR HAWK  
KHATCHERIAN, 2014

The church of the Holy Cross (*Surb Xaç'ġ*) was built during 915–921 under the royal patronage of King Gagik Arcruni of Vaspurakan (908–943) in the Arcruni capital on the island of Ałt'amar (fig. 15.1).<sup>\*</sup> The church's external decoration is comprised of many reliefs and among them the figure of King Gagik stands out on the west façade, presenting the model of his church to Christ (fig. 15.2). Christ stands in the gesture of blessing with one hand, while holding the Gospels with the other hand, on which it is written: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). To the left of Gagik and the right of Christ, two cherubim are depicted. Under the window, between Gagik and Christ, there are two angels, holding a medalion cross, which has been scraped off. Two animal heads are symmetrically sculpted above the two figures and between three crosses. Above them the so-called *vine frieze* is located, while further up one finds the standing figure of the Evangelist Matthew, carved just under the pediment of the roof.

Most researchers agree that both the interior and the exterior of the church sought to emphasise the power and glory of the Arcruni dynasty. The decoration of the royal church represents a perfect combination of biblical scenes,

<sup>\*</sup> All images of objects or illustrations have been reproduced with the kind permission of the relevant institutions where they are currently preserved, as indicated in the captions.



FIGURE 15.2 West façade of the Holy Cross church, AĒt'amar  
PHOTOGRAPH BY HRAIR HAWK KHATCHERIAN, 2014

especially inspired by the Old Testament, allegorically glorifying the royal family of the Arçrunis. The culmination of this family exaltation is Gagik's image on the west façade (fig. 15.3). This paper aims to provide a brief overview of that image, mainly focusing on such issues as the king's royal mantle and crown, his appearance on the west façade, his higher figure in comparison

with Christ's image, and the accurate representation of the same façade in the church model.

Two contemporary sources enable us to explore some of the features of the royal portrait against the background of contemporary historical events. The first source is the *History of the House of Arcrunik*<sup>1</sup> written by the historian T'ovma Arcruni and his Anonymous Continuator<sup>1</sup> both of whom composed their works under the patronage of King Gagik. The other is the *History of the Armenians* by Catholicos Yovhannēs V Drasxanakertc'i.<sup>2</sup> During the tenth century, Armenia was a tributary state of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, and along with Georgia and Aġuank' (Arrān or Caucasian Albania), it made up the administrative district of "Armīniya" ruled by an Arab *ostikan*.<sup>3</sup> After numerous rebellions against the Caliphate, members of the Bagratid (*Bagratuni*) family restored a form of autonomy and ruled most of historical Armenia from 884 onwards, when Ašot Bagratuni was crowned as king by the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tamid.<sup>4</sup> Soon, the Byzantine Emperor Basil I also recognised the authority of King Ashot.<sup>5</sup> Thus, after being deprived of independence for four hundred years, Armenian statehood was restored by the Bagratids. At the time, the Arcrunis ruled in the Principality of Vaspurakan. Through his maternal lineage Gagik Arcruni was the grandson of King Ašot I Bagratuni. In 908, soon after the establishment of the Bagratids' royal dynasty, Gagik Arcruni was crowned as king of Vaspurakan.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that the historians of the Arcruni family call Gagik "king of all Armenia"<sup>7</sup> rather than king of Vaspurakan, revealing his greater royal ambitions. The Arcruni king frequently rebelled against the Bagratids, even urging his troops to participate in devastating invasions organised by the Arabs. In 910, in the battle of Jknaṽačar, the armies of Amir Yūsuf and Gagik Arcruni defeated the Bagratid king Smbat I (890–914), Gagik's uncle, who surrendered himself to Yūsuf, and in 914 was tortured to death and crucified in public in the former capital Duin, the residence of the Arab *amirs* of that period.<sup>8</sup>

This brief outline of contemporary political realities demonstrates that the reign of Gagik Arcruni could not proceed smoothly and peacefully in

1 Citations here and below are from the English translation of Thomson 1985.

2 Citations here and below are from the English translation of Maksoudian 1987.

3 Ter-Ghewondyan 1976, 19–20.

4 Maksoudian 1987, 125–126. See also: Ter-Ghewondyan 1976, 59.

5 Maksoudian 1987, 129.

6 Thomson 1985, 348.

7 Thomson 1985, 348.

8 Maksoudian 1987, 165, 174–177.



FIGURE 15.3 King Gagik Arcruni, west façade  
PHOTOGRAPH BY HRAIR HAWK KHATCHERIAN, 2014

proximity to Bagratid domains and the latter's claims to all-Armenian kingship. Moreover, this played into the hands of 'Abbasid politics which aimed at preventing a possible unification of Armenian lands. Arab officials tried to establish good relations with the Arcrunis who were seeking to affirm their independence from the Bagratids. The coronation of Gagik Arcruni and the establishment of the Kingdom of Vaspurakan were first of all directed against the centralising policy of the Bagratids. Amid such political turmoil and instability, wonderful structures were being built in the Arcrunis' capital of Alt'amar: the church, the royal palace, the gardens, the streets, etc. The church of the Holy Cross is the only structure that survives to our days.

## 1 The Robe of the King

In the portrait of King Gagik on the west façade his robe is decorated with plump birds resembling quails (fig. 15.3). In Christian art, the quail symbolises success, rebirth and fecundity. In the Old Testament, the quail "provided food in the desert for the Israelites during the Exodus" (Exod 16:12–15).<sup>9</sup> It is significant that when speaking about the construction of the church of the Holy Cross on Alt'amar, the Continuator of T'ovma Arcruni writes: "Here are fulfilled the prophetic canticles: 'Rejoice, thirsty desert,'<sup>10</sup> and again: 'The earth will rejoice and many islands shall be glad.'<sup>11</sup> Truly this was once a thirsty desert, but is now the city of the great God."<sup>12</sup> As will be seen below, this is only one of the numerous biblical allusions that abound in the *History of the House of Arcrunik'* and that are also reflected in the decorative programme of the royal church.

The symbol of the quail and of similar birds within decorative circles was often depicted in Sasanian textiles,<sup>13</sup> which for a long time had a major influence on Islamic, as well as on the Armenian and Georgian cultures.<sup>14</sup> The quail symbol appears also on a silver coin of the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tazz (866–869), with the following quotation from the Quran: "The Mighty in God, Commander of the Faithful, might belongs to God!" (fig. 15.4).<sup>15</sup> In the decorations of the Palace of Hisham, attributed to the Umayyad dynasty, similar

9 Werness 2006, 337.

10 Isa 35:1.

11 Ps 96:1.

12 Thomson 1985, 361.

13 Martiniani-Reber 2008, 147.

14 For Georgian examples of the Sasanian bird motif, see: Djobadze 1976, 46–49.

15 Copenhagen, The David Collection, Collection of Islamic Art, Inv. no. C 516 (obverse).





FIGURE 15.4

Silver dirham of Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Mu'tazz (866-869), Baghdad or Samarra, 868 AD. Copenhagen, The David Collection, Inv. no. C 516 (obverse)

PHOTOGRAPH BY PERNILLE KLEMP

combinations with birds and vine-like plants may be observed.<sup>16</sup> The quail-like symbol surrounded by embroidered roundels continued to appear also in Fatimid art.<sup>17</sup> Although parallels between Gagik's mantle and these artworks are remote, some ornaments found in the king's outfit might indirectly be traced to the palatial art of the 'Abbasid, Umayyad and Fatimid periods, given that Sasanian royal traditions and symbols, present in Armenian royal ideology for several centuries, substantially contributed also to these arts.

Connections between modern Islamic costumes and King Gagik's mantle have been observed by Georgette Cornu, who suggests that Gagik's robe can be a *siqlātūn*.<sup>18</sup> *Siqlāt* or *siqlātūn* was one of the high-quality, one-color, silk fabrics produced in Baghdad, Tabaristan, Isfahan, Nishapur, Alexandria,<sup>19</sup> as well as in Muslim Spain.<sup>20</sup> According to Ibn Miskawayh it was "worth five dinars apiece."<sup>21</sup> It is also associated with the 'scarlet' type of medieval cloth and mostly with its red sort.<sup>22</sup> The *siqlātūn* of Baghdad was one of the "especially fine articles of clothing," as evidence from textual sources affirms.<sup>23</sup>

T'oros T'oramanean believed that the mantle of King Gagik might be a religious robe.<sup>24</sup> Armenag Sakisian associated the style of this robe to Sasanian traditions, and remarked that Sasanian textiles of three centuries earlier were still used in Armenia.<sup>25</sup> Another widespread opinion holds that Gagik's outfit was a gift sent to him by one of the Arab rulers.<sup>26</sup> The latter assumption is based on the Arcruni historian's testimony, according to which, Yūsuf clothed Gagik in an elaborately decorated garment: "He [Yūsuf] ... made him king over all Armenia. On his head he placed a crown of pure gold, artfully made and set with

16 Otto-Dorn 1964, fig. 17.

17 von Wilckens 1997, 160–161.

18 Cornu 1997, 56.

19 Serjeant 1972, 21, 23, 29, 213, 78, 84, 92, 158.

20 Ibid., 165, 169–170; Zanchi 2008, 23.

21 Serjeant 1972, 23.

22 Ibid., 21, 24; Zanchi 2008, 22–23.

23 Serjeant 1972, 29.

24 T'oramanean 1942B, 371–372.

25 Sakisian 1943, 353.

26 Der Nersessian 1977, 90; Thierry 1989, 277; Davies 1991, 120; Eastmond & Jones 2001, 161, etc.

pearls and valuable precious stones, which I am unable to describe. He clothed him in a robe embroidered with gold, a girdle and sword shining with golden ornament.”<sup>27</sup> Shortly after, the Continuator notes that Caliph al-Muqtadir also sent a crown and gorgeous garments: “When the chief of the Muslims, known as Jap’r in their books and also called by the name of Mokt’gir, knew that Gagik was reigning over Armenia, he sent him a crown and wonderfully decorated robes, and entrusted to him [the collection of] the royal taxes.”<sup>28</sup>

An extant example of a garment from the ninth century is a silk robe embroidered with gold (fig. 15.5). Here, the roundels enclosing animal motifs resemble those found on Gagik’s mantle, which might have been embroidered with gold if we take the Arcruni historian at his word. However, it is not excluded that the mantle of the relief is not a reproduction of a real one, but represents a symbolic robe, as a way of evoking the basic features of contemporary Islamic royal art. At the same time, the symbol of the quail found on it might have wished to convey a message on Gagik’s initiative to “make a desert the city of God,” as cited above.

Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc’i in turn tells us that Yūsuf sent a crown and royal garments to Smbat Bagratuni as well: “... the ostikan Yūsuf ... prepared numerous swift steeds, spirited and fierce, decorated with embellished ornaments, armour, golden reins and tassels, as well as a crown made out of gold and sapphire, and over which was a diadem studded with rows of pearls and other valuable gems, and with these also numerous other precious, royal robes, which were embroidered with gold and beautifully braided veils. He sent these at once to King Smbat in order to honour him.”<sup>29</sup> As one can see, this description does not differ much from the one composed by the Arcruni historian as he recorded Yūsuf’s dispatch of the royal crown and garment to Gagik.

Even if Arab rulers had adapted royal motifs typical of ancient Iran, in the tenth century these were perceived as expressions of royal power of the Arabic (‘Abbasid) Caliphate. Hence, the stylistic relationship between Ałt’amar reliefs and Sasanian art<sup>30</sup> (fig. 15.6, a, b) could be inspired not only from Iranian examples directly but also from the visual knowledge that Arcruni masters could acquire from the contemporary Arabic world. Thus, the architect Manuēl who was working under the direct supervision of King Gagik and who was probably the very author of the royal portrait, might have sought to emphasize the acquisition of the king’s royal title from the Caliphate, which dominated over Armenia and over the entire region. In other words, the portrait and the robe

27 Thomson 1985, 347.

28 Ibid., 348.

29 Maksoudian 1987, 157.

30 Orbeli & Trever 1935, xxvi.



FIGURE 15.5 Caftan decorated with senmurvs, silk, 9th century. St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, Inv. no. Kz-6584

in question aimed at emphasising the legitimacy of Gagik's royal status as sanctioned by the Arabs.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Issues regarding the political legitimacy of Gagik Arcruni are investigated in detail in Lynn Jones's studies. See: Jones 2001, 221–236, esp. 228, n. 34; Eastmond & Jones 2001, 162–163; Jones 2007, 61.



FIGURE 15.6 A) Alt'amar, fragment from the *vine frieze*, west façade  
 PHOTOGRAPH BY HRAIR HAWK KHATCHERIAN, 2014.  
 B) Sasanian wall panel, 6th–7th centuries. Berlin, Museum für  
 Islamische Kunst, I. 6197

Interestingly, this tendency can be observed also outside of Vaspurakan. Despite Bagratid rulers' attempts to strengthen their centralised power and hold over various Armenian lands, in tenth-century Armenia several local, autonomous kingdoms existed. Besides the Kingdom of Vaspurakan (founded in 908), these included the Kingdom of Kars or Vanand (founded in 963), the Kingdom of Lori or Tašir-Joraget (founded in 982), and the Kingdom of Siwnik' (founded in 987).<sup>32</sup> Although these kingdoms were formally vassals of the Bagratids of Ani, they were autonomous as to their military and economic affairs. The local Armenian kings, like Gagik Arcruni, from time to time rebelled against the Bagratids and maintained direct contacts with the Caliphate. These developments impacted differently the Bagratids of Ani and their subordinate kingdoms, which also played a certain role in the formation of Armenian palatial arts of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

A well-known artwork from the Kingdom of Kars provides an illustrative example for the view expressed above. It is a family portrait representing King Gagik of Kars, his daughter Marem, and his wife Goranduxt, found in the eleventh-century *Gospel of King Gagik-Abas of Kars* (fig. 15.7).<sup>33</sup> The portrait depicts the royal family members according to 'Oriental' conventions, such as

32 For the Armenian independent kingdoms and their relations with the Bagratids, see: Garsoïan 2004, 143–171.

33 Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, manuscript no. 2556, fol. 135v. On this miniature, see: Mathews & Daskalakis 1997.



FIGURE 15.7 King Gagik of Kars, Princess Marem and Queen Goranduxt. Gospel of King Gagik of Kars, 11th century. Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, ms. no. 2556, fol. 135v

their cross-legged seated position, the rich floral and animal motifs on their clothes, the sofa, the carpet, etc. Also decorations of the canon tables of this manuscript are sometimes associated with Sasanian, as well as Islamic art.<sup>34</sup> As for King Gagik's royal garment depicted in the above-mentioned miniature, it has been identified as *tiraz* textile.<sup>35</sup> A similar *tiraz* is seen in the robe of Princess Marem, whose central position, together with the hand gesture of her parents, demonstrates her special status as the successor to her father's throne. The exact date of the manuscript's creation is unknown, which makes it difficult to establish the details of a more specific political context of the time. It should be noted, however, that unlike Vaspurakan the Armenian nobility of the Kingdom of Kars maintained no direct contacts with Arab rulers, though they were forced to accept the rule of the Caliphate. It is possible that the manuscript was produced in the years when the Seljuks came to replace the Byzantine and Arabic dominance of the region. If so, the royal family portrait might have further connotations in view of this newly emerging Islamic polity.

34 Der Nersessian 1947, 119.

35 Der Nersessian 1977, 109.

It is worth noting that according to Matt'ēos Urhayec'i King Gagik of Kars had established contacts with Sultan Tughrul and his brother Alp Arslan.<sup>36</sup>

## 2 King Gagik as a “Sinner”

The Continuator of T'ovma Arcruni described the image of King Gagik “as if begging forgiveness for his sins.”<sup>37</sup> As noted above, Gagik's claims to become “king of all Armenians” were at odds with the existence of a centralised kingdom under Bagratid rule. Although the Arcruni historians sidestep these events, they also record Gagik's quest for remission of his sins. In the *History of the House of Arcrunik*, his numerous deeds, and particularly his coronation are described as manifestations of God's will and as the justification of his coming to power: “I do not hesitate to say that his anointing was invisibly performed by the Holy Spirit,” writes the Continuator.<sup>38</sup> The portrait of Gagik on the west façade is in compliance with the scenes focusing on faith and salvation that are found amongst the reliefs of the church, such as Jonah and the whale, the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, Daniel in the lions' den, the Children in fiery furnace, etc. This is also where we find the church's main entrance. Relief sculptures begin from the west façade, spreading along the southern, eastern, and northern façades of the church and ending at the same western entrance. This movement is clearly visible especially in the animal sculptures of the *vine frieze*, which are all moving to the left (fig. 15.2).<sup>39</sup>

Catholicos Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc'i mentions that Gagik and his brother Gurgēn “... recognizing the deadly snares awaiting them, and terrified of the tyrant ... were admonished as if by the fear of God, and feeling remorse in their hearts, did penance in accordance with the canons ...”<sup>40</sup> This might explain the location of the king's portrait—the west façade of the church, as according to traditions in Christian art the western part of the church usually depicts scenes of the Last Judgment where Christ, as King of Heaven, delivers the righteous. This idea is well visualised in the royal composition of Ałt'amar, where the heavenly and earthly kings—Christ and Gagik—are portrayed together, flanked by two cherubim. The cherub depicted on the left hides his hands under his wings, while the one on the right, standing closer to Christ,

36 Matt'ēos Urhayec'i 1898, 150–151. For the English and French translations, see: Dostourian 1993, 104; Dulaurier 1858, 125–126.

37 Thomson 1985, 360–361.

38 Ibid., 348.

39 Mnač'akanyan 1983, 49–50.

40 Maksoudian 1987, 173.

raises his hands in a gesture of worship (fig. 15.2).<sup>41</sup> Cherubim symbolise penitence and paradise, and according to the Book of Genesis, they guard the doors of Paradise (Gen 3:24). It appears, then, that Gagik, having received the remission of sins from Christ, is pictured with him in Paradise.<sup>42</sup>

That the composition could be connected with forgiveness and paradise–hell parallels is reinforced by another excerpt of the Arcruni historian. Speaking about the death of the king's brother Gurgēn, the Continuator notes that on the Day of Judgment Gagik will be on the right side of the crowd (that is among the righteous) and will save his brother: "He reckoned that perchance he might, on that last fearsome day of the Coming, have the opportunity to embrace his brother among those standing in vigilant glory on the right-hand side, and hear him say: 'Greetings to you, my brother, who saved my soul from the gates of hell. By your good services to me while you remained behind, you have raised your soul to life with me.'"<sup>43</sup> Thus, the Continuator represents Gagik not as a simple human being among the righteous but as the one who saves his brother from hell, just as Jesus saves the righteous (Mat 25:34).<sup>44</sup>

### 3 The Crown

Today, Gagik's crown is partially scraped off, but its initial shape is still discernible (fig. 15.8). The holes on the crown were meant to suggest that it was adorned with precious stones,<sup>45</sup> a common practice for rulers' sculptures of the region.<sup>46</sup> Two old drawings stress some very important details of the crown, now hardly visible. The first drawing was done by P'anos T'ērlēmēzean in 1914 (fig. 15.10), and the second one, which bears the note "M 1944" at the bottom, was published in Orbeli's study of 1968 (fig. 15.11).<sup>47</sup> In both cases, there is a semicircle above the central part of the crown, on top of which there was apparently an orb, as on Sasanian crowns. It is obvious that the upper part of the halo was initially incomplete, but it was covered with another fragment of the crown. This is paralleled by the portrait of a king on the north façade of the church, below the roof of the dome, in the so-called animal and princely

41 Der Nersessian 1965, 12.

42 On the cherubim of the AĒt'amar church, see also: Davies 1991, 119–120.

43 Thomson 1985, 350.

44 On the remission of sins and their connection to AĒt'amar, see also Pogossian 2017, 215, 219–221.

45 Der Nersessian 1965, 12; Mnac'akanyan 1983, 52; Davies 1991, 120; Jones 2001, 227, etc.

46 Djobadze 1976, 49.

47 Orbeli 1968, table vi.



FIGURE 15.8 King Gagik Arçruni, fragment  
PHOTOGRAPH BY HRAIR HAWK KHATCHERIAN, 2014



FIGURE 15.9  
Royal portrait, Animal and princely  
frieze, dome, north view, Alt'amar  
PHOTOGRAPH BY HRAIR HAWK  
KHATCHERIAN, 2014





FIGURE 15.10 King Gagik Arcruni  
DRAWING BY P'ANOS T'ĒRLĒMĒZEAN, 1914. EREVAN, MATENADARAN,  
ARCHIVES



FIGURE 15.11 King Gagik Arçruni  
DRAWING BY I. ORBELI, 1944. FROM: ORBELI 1968, TABLE VI



FIGURE 15.12 Royal portrait, *vine frieze*, east façade, Aēt'amar  
PHOTOGRAPH BY HRAIR HAWK KHATCHERIAN, 2014

frieze made up of carved animals and human faces (or “human masks”<sup>48</sup>). There the king can be seen clearly, with a typical Sasanian crown on his head (fig. 15.9). This portrait is very similar to that depicted on the west façade (fig. 15.8). All in all, in the exterior of the church of the Holy Cross, there are three crowned figures: the devotional portrait on the west façade, which is of interest to us (fig. 15.3), the cross-legged portrait in the *vine frieze* on the eastern façade (fig. 15.12),<sup>49</sup> and the one on the north façade, which is far less well-known (fig. 15.9).

The Sasanian crowns, as a rule, had a big central orb on the top. There is a great number of artworks showing Sasanian royal portraits, mostly preserved on metal plates.<sup>50</sup> The examination of one of these yields interesting

48 Der Nersessian 1965, 11.

49 The cross-legged figure on the eastern façade has been interpreted differently: as “crowned” or “feasting” prince (İpşiroğlu 1963, 58–62; Der Nersessian 1977, 89; Thierry 1989, Pl. xxxii, fig. 2), as Trdat III, the first Christian King of Armenia (Davies 1991, 81), as caliph al-Muqtadir (Otto-Dorn 1964, 79–80, 83; Muthmann 1982, 171–172). The most widespread view is that the depicted person represents King Gagik (Lalayan 1910, 202, fig. IV; Sakisian 1943, 351, 353, fig. 1; Der Nersessian 1965, 25; Vahramian & Der Nersessian 1974, 13, 72; Mnac'akanyan 1983, 122; Thierry 1989, 278; Jones 2001, 226; Eastmond & Jones 2001, 161; Travert & Kévorkian 2007, 37; Jones 2007, 57). According to a recent investigation by Edda Vardanyan, the crowned man on the east wall represents the Biblical King David (Vardanyan 2014, 713–717, esp. 713).

50 For the Sasanian crowns with semicircle and orb, see: Smirnov 1909, Plates xxiv (figs. 51–52), xxvi (fig. 54), xxvii (fig. 55), xxviii (fig. 56), xxix (fig. 57), xxxi (fig. 59), xxxii (fig. 60), cxxii (fig. 308), cxxiii (fig. 309); Orbeli & Trever 1935, Plates 6–16.



FIGURE 15.13 Sasanian silver plate, King Yazdgerd I slaying a stag, Iran, ca. 399-420, fragment. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Nr. 1970.6

observations. On a silver plate, preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there is a depiction of King Yazdgerd I (fig. 15.13), whose portrait has a number of similarities with that of Gagik. Both kings are depicted with haloes, the edges of which are covered with dots. Haloes can be found in old Moslem portraits too.<sup>51</sup> In the central parts of the two crowns there are crescents. The portraits are also stylistically alike: large expressive eyes, eyebrows, nose and beard. There are two wings above Gagik's crown, just as on Sasanian crowns. The wing-like details are best seen in the drawing from 1914 by T'êrlêmêzean (fig. 15.10). T'êrlêmêzean's drawing reveals another detail, which can hardly be seen today. Below the crown, on Gagik's forehead, there is a woven pattern. Apparently, it is the so-called "honour ribbon" which Gagik wore,<sup>52</sup> and which was typical of Sasanian royal portraits too.<sup>53</sup> Step'an Mnac'akanyan has suggested that Gagik wore the traditional winged crown of the Arsacids (the Aršakuni), as the Arcrunis considered themselves to be the descendants

51 Sakisian 1943, 353.

52 Mnac'akanyan 1983, 52-53.

53 For the Sasanian crowns with ribbons, see note 50 above. For other examples of Sasanian ribbons, see: Martiniani-Reber 1997, 111-112.

of the Arsacids.<sup>54</sup> This further strengthens the possible associations with the Sasanian crowns, given that the Arsacid dynasty of Greater Armenia was a branch of the Arsacids of Parthia, from whom the Sasanians seized the Iranian throne in the third century.

#### 4 The Model of the Church

In his left hand Gagik holds a model of the church, which he is presenting to Christ. The presence of the original church model in devotional compositions is one of the typical features of Armenian architecture.<sup>55</sup> T'ovma Arcruni writes that Gagik holds the church model "like a gold vessel full of manna, or a golden box filled with perfume."<sup>56</sup> This model is the faithful copy of the church of the Holy Cross, showing the west façade. It is made in high relief, which allows us to distinguish the north and south parts of the church as well (fig. 15.14). In the model, the broken part of the dome has a vertically incised channel. Orbeli believed that initially the model dome was crowned with a metal cross, which eventually incited looters who broke the model, perhaps hoping to find the treasures mentioned by T'ovma Arcruni.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the apparent similarity of the church and the model, there is a notable difference, which was first observed by Orbeli,<sup>58</sup> and later confirmed by other scholars.<sup>59</sup> On the model the dome is hemispherical in shape and not conical as it is today. Based on the inscriptions, on further evidence and on the shape of the church model, Orbeli suggested that the dome of the Holy Cross was initially hemispherical, and was given its conical shape during the construction commissioned by Catholicos Step'anos in the first quarter of the 14th century (probably in 1325).<sup>60</sup>

Although Orbeli does not develop this interesting view further, a piece of information found in the *History* of the Arcruni house might confirm his observation. The Continuator of T'ovma notes that the royal palace at AĒt'amar had golden domes: "It also had domes like heaven, ornamented with gold and shining with light."<sup>61</sup> He then reports that the western part of the church (where

54 Mnac'akanyan 1983, 42.

55 See: Cuneo 1969, 201–232, esp. 207; Petrosyan 2011, 80–81, etc.

56 Thomson 1985, 360.

57 Orbeli 1963B, 224; Orbeli 1980, 104.

58 Orbeli 1963B, 222–228; Orbeli 1980, 104.

59 Cuneo 1969, 207; Mnac'akanyan 1983, 41.

60 Orbeli 1963B, 224–228.

61 Thomson 1985, 357.



FIGURE 15.14 Model of the Holy Cross church, Alt'amar  
PHOTOGRAPH BY HRAIR HAWK KHATCHERIAN, 2014

King Gagik is portrayed) was connected to the royal palace via a vaulted staircase,<sup>62</sup> which no longer exists. It can be assumed that Manuēl designed these two structures—the palace and the palatine church—alike, building the structures of Gagik's capital in the same familiar domed style.

## 5 The Composition on the West Façade

The devotional composition on the west façade totally differs from analogous scenes in medieval art, as this position was often designated to depict scenes related to the Last Judgment and Salvation. Yet, the Arcruni king is not depicted bending or kneeling before Christ but equal to him. His portrait, with its gorgeous outfit and crown, dominates over Christ's figure (fig. 15.2). Despite the symmetrical composition, the attention of the viewer is drawn to the figure of Gagik, carved taller than Christ. The difference between Christ's and Gagik's heights has been explained as a mistake due to the fact that the carvings were likely completed before the stones were put together. As a result this 'disproportion' could "only have become obvious when the reliefs were in place."<sup>63</sup> The talented master Manuēl created a flawless building, and his making such a glaring mistake in the depiction of the most important figures seems unlikely. The structure is monumental, and the difference between the dimensions of the two figures is in fact not very small. Rather, the taller figure of the king can be explained by the desire of the Arcrunis to express their absolute independence<sup>64</sup> and Gagik's unhidden ambition to represent himself in imitation of the Heavenly King.

Such compositions, where the ruler dominates over Christ are not characteristic of Christian art. Instead, they were particularly typical in depictions of Sasanian kings, often covering with their figures entire walls of a palace or temple. They were usually depicted equal in size to the gods portrayed beside them. Similarly, the Persian king Khosrow II is sculpted between the gods Ahura Mazda and Anahita within the large arch in Taq-e Bostan.<sup>65</sup> Orbeli notes that all images of Sasanian kings were based on the notion that for centuries all the passers-by should view them as conquerors, as the most handsome, the strongest, the proudest, the cleverest, the fairest rulers, thus

62 Ibid., 361. See also: Mnac'akanyan 1983, 38–39; Thierry 1989, 273.

63 Davies 1991, 141–142.

64 On the princely ideology of the AĒt'amar sculptures, see Jolivet 1981, 86.

65 Garsoïan 1991, fig. 1b.

reminding people of their victories and valiant deeds.<sup>66</sup> In this sense, the style of the depiction of King Gagik's portrait on the west façade of the Holy Cross church could be explained better by ancient royal art and traditions, than by traditional Christian art, where the king, despite his importance, was always subordinate to Christ or Virgin Mary. Apparently, the 'free character' of Vaspurakan art, which was formed in the tenth century, left its traces on later artworks, particularly on miniature paintings. Artists of Vaspurakan who were closer to the eastern, Persianate world and who relied on the church of the Holy Cross as well as the other richly decorated structures on the Aht'amar island as prototypes, often illustrated religious manuscripts in a relatively independent manner. Decorations of Aht'amar's structures might even have served as models for some of them.

## 6 Conclusion

Historical and political events in the region of Vaspurakan, rather tense in the tenth century, constitute the background against which to understand the portrait of King Gagik, as well as the decorations of the church and of the royal palace at Aht'amar. According to canonical rules of medieval art the most effective way to stress the importance of secular rulers was to create a symbolic association between their images and Biblical characters and events. It was through such a synthesis that royal artists were able to convey the main messages of legitimacy and projection of power. These were precisely the means used by the artist working for Gagik, who through his art glorified the Arcruni family and King Gagik.

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66 Orbeli 1924, 146–147.



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